NDEPENDENT INFORMATION FOR SMART CONSUMERS

choice

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Cosmetic surgery
Not only is the industry unregulated, but consumers are losing out in a turf war.

Plastics recycling
What happens to the plastics you put into your kerbside recycling bin?

On test

- 106cm TVs
- Washing machines
- Espresso machines
- Twin-tuner DVRs
- Electric toothbrushes
- Handheld blenders

Power to the people

How to plug in to the best energy deal

Credit insurance rorts

Fruit juice 'extras' – don't be fooled

Why the fuss about digital radio?

Exercise – separating fact from fiction

Which wine medals can you really trust?

The hazards of eating 'nanofoods'

116 PRODUCTS RATED!

Plus – save money on HDMI and Toslink AV cables with our CHOICE test report

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Subscribers' helpline call 02 9577 3399

Email ausconsumer@choice.com.au

"CHOICE it" before you buy it

CHOICE gives you the power to choose the very best goods and services, and avoid the worst. Because we pay full price for the products we test, we can remain 100% independent. We don't take advertising and we don't accept freebies from industry – our only aim is to give consumers the best possible information about buying products and services. We're not a government body and our consumer publishing and advocacy is funded by subscriptions to our magazines and CHOICE Online, and from other services we supply for the benefit of consumers.

We have laboratories in Marrickville, Sydney, that test everything from juicers to plasma TVs, coffee grinders to MP3 players and air conditioners. We test hundreds of products every year. There's no hidden agenda to our testing – we simply road-test products so that consumers like you don't get ripped off. CHOICE ratings are based on lab tests, expert assessments and consumer surveys.

CHOICE also has staff who research a wide range of consumer services – everything from the financial industry to the organic food business, supermarket practices to drug companies and pharmacies. They reveal the truth behind the facts and figures, and investigate the quality and the claims.

CHOICE has also always campaigned about consumer goods and services that affect your life. We lobby government and regulators on behalf of all consumers in Australia. CHOICE was established in 1959 and is a not-for-profit, non-party-political organisation.

CHOICE Best Buy CHOICE calls a product a Best Buy if it delivers high quality at a comparatively low price. Not every test report has Best Buys.

CHOICE Green Buy CHOICE calls a product a Green Buy if it delivers both good quality and environmental performance at a comparatively low price. Not every test report has Green Buys.

CHOICE Video When you see the CHOICE Video icon, you can find more information about that story at www.choice.com.au.

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CHOICE Shopper

Call 1300 360 655. Personal subscribers can call us with the model name and number of the product you want to buy, the price you want to beat, and your CHOICE subscriber number.

On test

44 + **106cm TVs** The sound quality of these TVs leaves much to be desired.

47 + **Washing machines** The days of throwing your back out to pack and unpack front loaders may be over.

52 + **Automatic espresso machines** More convenient than the manual machines, but the coffee is just not as good.

55 + **Twin-tuner DVRs** Even the top-scoring DVRs could still be easier to use.

58 + **Electric toothbrushes** The best are worth the extra cost.

60 + **Handheld blenders** Ideal for small jobs that don't require pulling out the bulky food processor.

CHOICEextra.com.au This free website for CHOICE magazine subscribers is an index of articles from Jan/Feb 2002, with links to PDFs.

CHOICE Plus Get the magazine plus full online access when you upgrade your membership for just $11.50 per quarter (usually $21.95 for online membership). Go to www.choiceextra.com.au and follow the prompts.

Comment

Charge!

A major change to how we pay to use ATMs begins from 3 March, when ATM owners will be legally allowed to charge you a fee for using their machine.

The new direct charging rules will affect you when you're accessing an ATM that's not owned and operated by your bank or credit union. Until now banks and credit unions negotiated a fee with ATM owners and billed you.

From March 3, the ATM owner will be allowed to charge you a fee directly when you use its ATM. While it might sound like just another opportunity to fleece fees from unsuspecting consumers, there is an upside. Competition between ATM owners is expected to lead to substantially lower transaction fees – at least where ATMs are plentiful.

Direct ATM charging is designed to cut out the middle man, the banks. Instead of ATM charges being channelled through your bank, you'll now pay directly to the machine owner. This means more transparency in pricing and an end to mark-ups from the big end of town. At least, that's the theory.

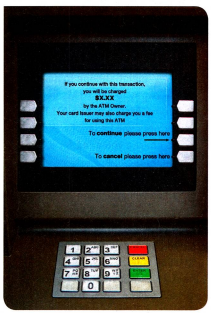
At the time of going to print, at least one major bank, NAB, has said it will charge consumers an additional fee for using ATMs outside its network. We think this undermines the entire point of the reform – for customers to pay a single transparent fee for a single ATM transaction.

CHOICE has been at the front line representing consumers' interests during development of the new rules, launching a campaign targeting the major banks' fees. We want to make sure consumers don't get slugged twice for the one transaction. The Reserve Bank of Australia has said plainly there's no justification for banks to continue charging these fees, so we won't let up in our demand that banks cut them out completely.

You can find more about ATM direct charging in this month's Consumer News, page 4. ■

Anny Friis
Publisher

BANK FEES


If you continue with this transaction, you will be charged
$XXX
by the ATM Owner
Your card issuer may also charge you a fee for using the ATM
To continue, please press here
To cancel please press here

ISTOCKPHOTO

ATM watch

Big banks plan to slug you with a second fee.

Consumers look like being the losers in the much-publicised changes to ATM fees that take effect from 3 March (see page 3 for details). NAB has confirmed it will charge its customers 50 cents for using another bank or company's ATM (a "foreign" ATM transaction). At the time of going to press, three of the other four big banks indicated they'll also charge a fee, but haven't disclosed how much. Commonwealth Bank is "reviewing its position".

CHOICE – and the Reserve Bank of Australia – think there's no longer justification for institutions to charge a foreign ATM fee. The objective of these reforms is to increase transparency and competition, resulting in lower fees for consumers. Previously, undisclosed "interchange" fees were passed between financial institutions and ATM owners when consumers used another bank or company's "foreign" ATM. Now, all such fees are unbundled, out in the open and charged directly.

When you now withdraw cash or check your balance at a foreign ATM, you'll be charged a fee by the machine owner. This will be displayed on screen after you enter your PIN, such as in the picture, above, giving you the option to proceed with the transaction or cancel it at no cost. If your own institution also charges a fee for such foreign transactions, it won't be displayed, so check it. If you already get free transactions at your own institution's ATMs, check that the arrangement will continue.

Part of the intention behind ATM fee reforms is to let competitive forces take hold, resulting in lower fees for consumers, particularly in areas where there's lots of competition, such as shopping malls and retail precincts in major cities and towns. In those places, if you're not happy with the fee displayed, you can use a different ATM. However, where there's less competition – such as in rural areas, casinos, pubs and clubs – we're concerned we may see higher prices.

We'll be monitoring developments with foreign ATM fees but we need your eyes and ears. You can alert us to the best and worst ATM fees you encounter by joining the forum at www.choice.com.au/atmwatch. ■

CORRECTION CAR INSURANCE, FEBRUARY 2009

In the table on page 37, CommInsure is listed as charging extra for monthly payments. This is incorrect as CommInsure offers monthly payments without an extra fee. CommInsure's revised policy score is now 80%, up from 78%.

FOOD SAFETY

Pesticide ban

A toxic pesticide has been banned in New Zealand but is still being used on Australian fruits and vegetables.

The highly toxic pesticide endosulfan will continue to be used in Australia, despite having been banned in more than 50 countries, including the European Union, several Asian and West African nations and now New Zealand.

Food Standards Australia New Zealand (FSANZ), the national food regulator, told CHOICE that endosulfan was banned in NZ because there are less stringent controls governing its use there than in Australia, while the Australian Pesticide and Veterinary Medicines Authority (APVMA), which regulates the use of agricultural chemicals, believes "a decision by one country should not necessarily be seen as an imperative for others".

Endosulfan has been used to control insect pests since the 1950s. Chemically, it's related to aldrin, chlordane and heptachlor, pesticides already banned in Australia and almost everywhere else in the world. It's persistent in the environment and has the potential to accumulate up the food chain and cause reproductive and developmental damage in humans and animals. Endosulfan was one of two pesticides recently blamed for causing deformities and the death of thousands of fish in Noosa River.

The APVMA reviewed the use of endosulfan in 2005 and subsequently introduced additional restrictions. But it's still permitted on apples, broccoli, cabbage, cauliflower and other fruits and vegetables, while recent CHOICE testing (*CHOICE*, February 2008) found endosulfan on strawberries.

The APVMA argues its decisions are based on the best available scientific information, including commercially confidential information not available to NZ's regulator, the Environmental Risk Management Authority (ERMA). But confidential information of this nature is subject to industry bias and lacks scientific credibility because it isn't peer reviewed, while the lack of transparency casts doubt on whether FSANZ and the APVMA are truly independent of the industries they are supposed to regulate. ERMA only revoked approval for endosulfan following an exhaustive reassessment process that included gathering information from industry and through public submissions and a public hearing.

CHOICE believes Australian consumers should at least be as well protected from toxic chemicals as New Zealanders – particularly as FSANZ is supposed to be a trans-Tasman regulator and most other aspects of food regulation are the same in both countries. ■

HEALTH

Stevia – sweet, yes, but safe?

joule-free alternative to sugar is now on the market, but some experts foreshadow potential cancer risk.

Several, but not all, tests show that the sweetener made from stevia causes DNA damage and mutations.

Sweeter than sugar but without the kilojoules, plant-based stevia sounds too good to be true. Although t a new product, stevia has recently garnered much tention with news that in the US, beverage giants oca-Cola and Pepsi are planning to introduce drinks ade with a stevia extract.

While Coca-Cola North America was first off the ocks at Christmas with the launch of Sprite Green, which sweetened with truvia, made from stevia leaves, Pepsi rumoured to be releasing a citrus-flavoured product on that is well-suited to the stevia flavour. Stevia will be new taste experience for consumers, often described as eing somewhere between licorice and treacle.

In Australia, the sweetener was approved for use the Australian food authority (FSANZ) in October last ear. The initial application and submissions were made Central Queensland University's Centre for Plant and ater Science on behalf of all consumers, users and otential stevia growers.

While this is all great news for kilojoule-conscious consumers, according to a recent report from the University of California Los Angeles (UCLA) several, though not all, tests show that the sweetener causes DNA damage and mutations, which raises the prospect that the product could cause cancer.

According to experts from both UCLA and the US Center for Science in the Public Interest there is still one key animal study to be conducted which should indicate whether or not the product can be considered safe.

FSANZ spokesperson Lydia Buchtmann says stevia has passed all necessary tests for approval and that there are no concerns with the product, which is considered safe. She says the product has been used in countries such as Japan for many years without problems.

Australian consumers may see stevia-based products hit the shelves later this year. ■

CHARITY REGULATOR

Charities face major changes

CHOICE welcomes moves by the Senate to improve the transparency of charities and not-for-profit organisations.

Australian charities and not-for-profit organisations should be subject to a new national regulatory body d general overhaul of the sector, according to recommendations ade in a recent report by the Senate Economics Committee.

The recommendations made in the report would have gnificant implications for the sector, which includes between 0,000 and 700,000 not-for-profits. Among its recommendations, e report calls for a compulsory register of all not-for-profit rganisations in Australia, as well as an identifying number located to each organisation.

The Senate inquiry was sparked by the publication of a CHOICE rvey about charities, (see *CHOICE*, April 2008), which showed at fewer than 20% of people were confident about the final estinations of their donated dollars, despite the fact that 94% of espondents thought it was important to have that information.

"We welcome the committee's recommendations," says Gordon Renouf, CHOICE's Director of Policy and Campaigns. "They should increase consumer confidence that money they donate is being used for the purpose they intended, and that the charities they support are not weighed down by inconsistent or inefficient regulatory requirements."

David Thompson, chairman of the non-profit Roundtable, says figures show the sector could save $100 million a year if the government reached an agreement with the states to regulate not-for-profits and charities in the same way.

The proposed national charities regulator would develop and maintain a searchable public database, ensure compliance with relevant legislation, develop best-practice standards and educate on these standards. Among other recommendations is the establishment of a new ministerial position to oversee the sector and a mandatory, specialist legal structure adopted for all not-for-profit organisations through referral of state and territory powers. ■

FIXED HOME LOANS

Fixed rates pain

Some home owners who locked in their loans a year ago now pay about 30% more interest than those on variable rates.

Tony, pictured, is halfway through his five-year, 7.35% fixed rate home loan. Last October, when variable rates fell, he considered changing to a variable loan and was told by the CBA that he would be up for a "break fee" of $1900. Tony asked the bank how it calculated this fee but had to wait for a response. When he checked about three weeks later, the fee had increased to $34,000.

A CBA spokesman told CHOICE: "Prior to 28 October we weren't calculating our loss correctly, therefore we weren't recouping the right amount from the customer and the error was massively in the customer's favour … If the customer had chosen to break his fixed term on 23 October, we would have undercharged him by just over $20,000." The rest of the difference was attributed to changes in the wholesale rate between Tony's first and second request.

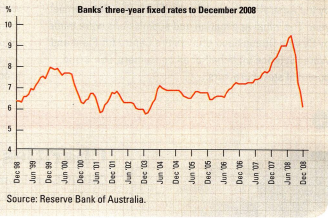
When you lock in your rate, your bank borrows money from the wholesale market. When you repay early, the bank needs to reinvest or relend the money at rates current at that time; if wholesale rates are lower than when you fixed the loan, the bank makes a loss and recoups the money from you in the form of a break fee.

Fixed rates have now come down to almost their lowest point in the past 10 years, as shown in the graph. While a fixed rate can help you budget, if you locked in your loan a year ago, you could be paying about 30% more interest than someone on a variable rate. If you're considering a fixed rate, take the following steps.

- Check if the lender allows you make extra repayments during the fixed term, such as $10,000 extra per calendar year.
- Ask the lender for an example of the break fee for your loan amount at a range of different interest rates in the future, such as if wholesale rates were 1%, 2% and 3% below today's wholesale rates.
- Lock in only part of your loan, which is called a split loan.
- If you are thinking of breaking a fixed loan, ask your bank for the fee and make sure it gives you a deadline, as the fee usually only applies until the end of that business day.

If you have a complaint about your lender, contact the Banking and Financial Services Ombudsman at www.bfso.org.au, or phone 1300 78 08 08. ■

Fixed rate ride



Source: Reserve Bank of Australia.

ANIMAL WELFARE

Not-so free range

A new report uncovers the tragic reality of some 'free-range' chicken farming.

Following CHOICE's investigation of "free-range" eggs (June 2008), animal rights group Voiceless recently published a report on the chicken meat industry, *From Nest to Nugget: An Exposé of Australia's Chicken Factories*. Its key findings are disturbing.

- Selective breeding produces birds that can grow to slaughter weight in 35 days – naturally they can live for up to seven years.
- Up to 60,000 birds may be housed in one shed, crammed together so much that on average each bird gets less floor space than the equivalent of one A4 page of paper.
- Labels can be misleading and there's no legal requirement for the production system to be stated on the label. Worse, there's no legal definition of "free range" in Australia. Chickens labelled "barn fresh", "grain fed", "hormone free" and "100% natural" are likely to have been produced by factory farms.

The report also found that cruel practices are sanctioned by state and territory animal welfare laws. The federal guidelines, *Model Code of Practice for the Welfare of Animals: Domestic Poultry* set conditions, such as the maximum number of birds permitted per square metre of shed area, that effectively entrench current practices. In contrast, the European Union has set standards that, while criticised by animal welfare groups, still attempt to address some of the worst aspects of factory farming. ■

HEALTH

Safer sunscreens

Some sunscreens contain nanoparticles that could damage your skin, but there are alternatives.

ISTOCKPHOTO

Friends of the Earth has published a *Safe Sunscreen Guide* listing brands of sunscreen that claim to actively avoid using nanoparticles, as there's a growing body of evidence that suggests nanoparticles may be hazardous to your health (see our report on nanofoods, page 40).

Traditional sun blockers are based on zinc oxide or titanium dioxide, white pigments that form an opaque film on your skin. They give excellent protection and make great warpaint for young surfers and cricketers of all ages, but are otherwise unattractive. Many sunscreen manufacturers have been quick to adopt nanotechnology, which exploits the very different properties of extremely small particles.

The newer sunscreens still contain zinc oxide or titanium dioxide, but in the form of nanoparticles typically about 40 nanometres in size; about 2000 times smaller than the diameter of a human hair). In this form they are transparent, and therefore almost invisible, but still block the sun's harmful UV rays. About 70% of sunscreens containing titanium dioxide and 30% of sunscreens containing zinc oxide now have these materials in nanoparticle form.

But zinc oxide and titanium dioxide nanoparticles can cause production of free radicals when exposed to UV light. Free radicals can damage the DNA of cells and may cause other harm as well. Some studies suggest that nanoparticles can penetrate the skin through areas affected by acne, eczema, sunburn or nicks from shaving. Scientific opinion is moving towards recommending caution before we allow ourselves to be exposed to manufactured nanoparticles in products such as sunscreens.

Our national regulator, the Therapeutic Goods Administration (TGA), has left consumers in the dark. Having given nanoparticles of zinc oxide and titanium dioxide the green light, the TGA maintains that there is no cause for concern, and there's still no legal requirement for sunscreen manufacturers to disclose their use of nanoparticles on product labels. So the Friends of the Earth's publication is welcome news for consumers. It can be downloaded free from www.nano.foe.org.au.

It's important, however, not to give up using sunscreen. Whatever the risk from nanoparticles, the risk from too much exposure to the sun is likely to be greater. It's a sobering fact that more than 1600 Australians die each year from skin cancer. ■

There's still no legal requirement that sunscreen companies disclose the use of nanoparticles on product labels.

CAN YOU HELP OUR RESEARCH INTO PENSION FUNDS, WILLS AND BFAs?

We're researching wills, pension funds and binding financial agreements (BFA). If you've invested in a pension fund we'd like to know how you chose it, your experiences and information about the fees and performance.

We're also looking into wills and BFAs – did you use a legal professional or buy a DIY will kit? Tell us your story by email, money@choice.com.au, fax 02 9577 3377 or write to the Money Team, 57 Carrington Rd, Marrickville 2204.

In brief

'DIY' super grows

Over the past decade, the number of self-managed super funds (SMSFs) has grown exponentially. There are now close to 400,000 "DIY" funds which hold about 30% of all superannuation dollars. The market share of SMSFs is bigger than that of the mainly bank-owned retail super funds (29%) and not-for-profit industry funds (17%). To make self-managed super work, investors should have plenty of time, expertise and money – at least $200,000.

Cashback feedback

February's article on the dubious benefits of cashbacks drew a spirited response from readers. Long delays in receiving the cash back seemed to be the biggest gripe, although many readers had positive experiences to report. Visit www.choice.com.au/cashback to see our blog, a new feature of our website that gives readers the chance to share feedback.

Shonky's contributes to bank dropping fee

Adelaide Bank has removed unfair fees after receiving a CHOICE Shonky Award last year. In a letter to CHOICE, the bank's spokesperson wrote: "I'm aware that the Shonky Awards aim to achieve results and raise standards and we would like to thank you for drawing our attention to this issue, which has prompted us to make a change for the better." CHOICE congratulates the bank.

GPS

Tracking it down

With travellers and keen photographers in mind, this GPS device tracks where you've been.

Clar global positioning system (GPS) devices that use suction pads to attach to the front window are becoming increasingly common. But what alternative GPS options are available if you don't own a car or don't wish to lug around a handheld unit?

The Telespial Systems Trackstick II is not a GPS in the traditional sense as it does not supply you with on-the-go directions. Instead, the product can be used to check out where you have been once you've completed your trip. It also enables you to "geotag", identifying via Google Earth the geographical location, time and date of any photos you take. The powerful software supplied allows you to integrate your photos with the locations logged by the Trackstick II.

We struggled a little with the software due to the sheer range of options and an initially unintuitive interface. Once we reset the measurements from imperial to metric, we didn't need to change them again.

After loading the Trackstick II with two alkaline AAA batteries, we took it for a spin around southern Sydney and found it did a good job tracking us throughout our journey. By connecting its USB port to a computer with the downloaded software it delivers location, time and speed. An alkaline battery life claim of 16 hours for recording every five seconds, and up to three days for recording every 15 seconds, means it will likely need substantial replacements if you are travelling for long periods. Check out *CHOICE*, December 2008/January 2009 for our test of rechargeable batteries.

Once the Google Earth software is downloaded, the Trackstick II software enables seamless integration into Google Earth with your photos, along with the tracking information, claiming to store months of data.

At $290, we thought the price was a little high so we compared a cheaper alternative product, the I-GotU GT-100 by Mobile Action ($80), but found that while its software was very intuitive, it dropped the signal too often to be useful.

CHOICE VERDICT

For travellers who wish to track themselves and record memories with photos, this device is ideal but may require a little extra patience in becoming familiar with the software. However, for a similar price you can purchase a handheld GPS device of only marginally greater size and weight that gives you the same sort of information and has a display to show where you are. Look out for our upcoming test of handheld GPS devices. ■

TELESPIAL SYSTEMS Trackstick II

Price $290
Storage 1MB
Dimensions 11.5cm x 3cm x 2cm
Contact www.trackstick.com.au

PORTABLE SLOW COOKER

Have cooker, will travel

Energy-efficient and portable, this slow cooker is handy at home and outdoors.

The Thermos Shuttle Chef consists of a steel cooking pot that fits inside an insulated outer pot. You partially cook the food in the inner pot on a stovetop or camp fire, then place it into the outer pot and put the lid on. The outer pot has vacuum-insulated double walls so the food keeps cooking slowly in its own retained heat.

THERMOS Shuttle Chef Cook and Carry System RPC 4500

Price $269
Contact www.thermalcookware.com

Because food needs to be only partially cooked before being transferred into the insulated container, the Shuttle Chef uses less energy than it would take to cook the same dish completely on the stove or in an electric slow cooker.

We tested the Shuttle Chef by cooking a liquid (pumpkin soup) and solid dish (boiled rice) as per its supplied recipes. The cooker did an excellent job with the soup; it cooked in one hour and stayed above 60°C (so no dangerous bacteria will grow) for more than eight hours. By contrast, the rice was slightly crunchy after the recommended cooking time of one minute on the stove followed by 30 minutes in the outer pot. This would be improved by cooking it a little longer before transferring to the outer pot. Once transferred, the rice stayed safely hot for four hours.

The Shuttle Chef is compact and easy to clean. The tested model has a 4.5L inner pot, but other models with different size pots are available. You'll need a glove or cloth when removing the inner pot after cooking, as the metal handle can get hot.

At $269 (more with accessories), the Shuttle Chef is considerably more expensive than most electric slow cookers. You'll get best value if you're a big fan of slow-cooked food and/or a regular caravanner or camper.

CHOICE VERDICT

If slow-cooked food appeals to you, the Shuttle Chef is a worthwhile investment. Although not cheap, it's easy to use, portable, energy-efficient and cooks a wide range of dishes. ■

WI-FI ENABLED DEVICE

Your new net chum

Keep an eye on the internet with this compact desktop companion.

The deceptively cute Chumby may look and feel like it's made to be kicked around, but resist the temptation – it's not a hacky sack. Resembling a small, leather-clad beanbag, the Chumby is actually an information device designed to be your personal companion, sitting at your bedside or on your desk and delivering constantly updated customised content to its 3.5-inch touchscreen directly from the internet.

Chumby's main purpose is to run widgets – little internet programs that display a particular type of information. You may be familiar with widgets on your PC through Yahoo Widgets, Mac OS X Widgets or Windows Vista Gadgets; Chumby widgets are similar. There are hundreds to choose from, including widgets for weather, news, music, podcasts, sport, humour, financial information, online auctions, photos, video clips, games and much more. New widgets are being added regularly to the dozens of categories on the Chumby website (see www.chumby.com).

The idea behind Chumby is to build your own personal collections, or channels, of widgets that give you only the content you want. It connects to the internet via a local area wireless network (Wi-Fi). The first time you start it up you'll need a PC to register – "activate" – it via the website of internet service provider Internode (www.chumby.on.net). Chumby can then display your choice of widgets any time it's connected to the net (preferably via broadband), without requiring a computer or even a keyboard. Because widgets can be created to show just about any kind of information, Chumby can actually become more useful the longer you own it – just keep adding widgets to your channels.

You can navigate through Chumby's channels and settings by tapping the touch screen, and its built-in motion sensor lets you "flick" through your widgets simply by tilting it. Chumby can also play music directly from the internet via its music channels. Two USB ports at the rear allow you to add external devices, such as a USB key or even an iPod.

Chumby's future is somewhat open-ended. It's been designed to evolve as developers create new widgets and devices to attach to it.

CHOICE VERDICT

Chumby's fun look and even funnier name belies its potential. Whether you use it as a high-tech toy or serious information device, with a Chumby by your side there's no excuse for not keeping up to date.

For the full story on the Chumby, see the March/April 2009 issue of *CHOICE Computer*. To subscribe, phone 1800 069 552 toll-free or go to www.choice.com.au/magazines. ■

CHUMBY

Price $299
Dimensions 14cm x 11cm x 8cm
Contact www.internode.on.net

With the Chumby, you can build your own personal collection of widgets that give you only the content you want.

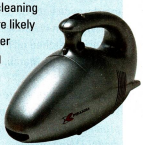
Coming

Pressure cookers

The days of exploding cookers your grandmother warned you about are long gone, with the latest models now fitted with safety features, such as double locking lids and steam release valves. They'll save you time and energy, but as we discovered, there may be a sacrifice in flavour for the convenience.

Handheld vacuum cleaners

Handheld vacs have come a long way since we last tested them nearly a decade ago. We put the latest models through everyday cleaning tasks you're likely to encounter vacuuming both your home and your car.



Clothes dryers

Dryers can be the only option if you don't have a clothes line or outdoor space for drying clothes naturally. We tell you which are best for minimising your carbon footprint, as well as which are the best buys for installation and ongoing running costs.

Email or write – we want to hear from you.

Your experiences help our research and often let other readers know about scams and rip-offs. Positive outcomes you've had to a complaint you took to a manufacturer, retailer, importer or tradesperson interest us too. See opposite for how to contact us.

Digital TV reception problems

We are concerned about the consistency in our digital TV reception, which will become more of a problem when analog broadcasting is phased out. Presently, when we experience interference with our digital signal, due to local unknown interference causing loss of sound and severe distortion through pixelling, we switch to analog and are able to watch and hear the program with just some interference lines through the picture.

What can we do when the analog signal is switched off?

Anne, Bacchus Marsh, Victoria

CHOICE says *There are several things you can check to help overcome the problems you are experiencing with your digital TV reception.*

- *If the problem occurs at a particular time each day, or when particular events take place (such as turning on a microwave or washing machine), it could be interference. Quad-shielded cables may help with this; they have extra shielding to minimise any interference getting into the signal. Also, make sure that each TV aerial outlet has a device connected – open TV aerial plugs can pick up unwanted signals.*
- *Sometimes TV signals from the aerial are too strong or weak for the TV tuner to interpret. This is difficult to ascertain without a special meter, so you may need an aerial installer to check. If the signal is too high, you can use an attenuator to reduce it slightly; if it's too weak, you may need a new aerial or a booster.*
- *Some older aerials may have trouble picking up some parts of the digital TV spectrum – again, you'll need an installer to check the aerial. It may have been pushed around by wind or birds and need some repositioning, or the symptoms may just affect one channel.*
- *Some TV tuners cope better with poor signals than others (which is why we test them – see our TV test, page 44). If possible, try borrowing a different brand or model from a friend to see if the problem still exists with that one.*

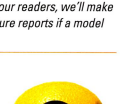
Where's the handset?

Could you please consider this additional rating element for your next tests of cordless phones: "does it have a handset 'find' button?" This usually works by pressing a button on the base station and the phone beeps until you find it. We have three handsets for a Panasonic phone that was reviewed in your article and, with four kids in the house, they are forever lost. It's essential!

Braham Bloom, via email

CHOICE says *We won't be able to include a rating for a cordless phone's "find" button (commonly known as a pager), but all the models we recently tested have one. And since we now know how important this feature is to some of our readers, we'll make sure to mention in future reports if a model doesn't have it.*

I bought a lemon!



I purchased an LG DVD Recorder/VCR Combo with a three-year warranty in May 2006. Within a couple of months after purchase it developed problems with DVD recording/playing. After three warranty repairs, when it broke down a fourth time, LG replaced the product with a similar but supposedly later model in January 2008, after my considerable urging by telephone and email.

The replacement developed the same fault as the original, having already had the DVD drive replaced twice and now, once again, less than two months after the last repair, it's failing to recognise any discs. I haven't yet put it in for repairs because I am so disconsolate over the unbelievably poor level of performance that I just haven't been able to raise the motivation.

I have previously indicated to LG that I would like to be reimbursed for the purchase price of the product so that I can buy something that works the way it is meant to, but they won't agree to that.

Do I have any options other than to keep getting repairs done until the warranty expires on 25 May 2009 and then give up in disgust?

Terry Maguire, via email

CHOICE says *Considering Terry had so many problems with the devices, and getting them fixed, it's no surprise he thought of giving up on the whole thing and buying something else that would work. But in such a case, where something is broken and continues to break down, the Queensland Office of Fair Trading tells us a consumer should indeed pursue a refund, and offered to assist. For the moment, however, Terry won't have to invest more thought into the matter if he's prepared to give the brand one more chance.*

Upon our query, LG's representative contacted Terry, offered to replace the appliance once again with the latest model and promised to resolve the issue promptly "in the very unlucky case" that something goes wrong again.

hank you, CHOICE Shopper!

couple of weeks ago I asked the CHOICE hopper service to price a gas stove/ ooker for me. They came back with a rice of $300 less than the $1500 I had een able to find. Thank you, CHOICE!
lelen, SA, via email

HOICE says *Happy to help. CHOICE Shopper an do the negotiating and comparing for ou on household items worth more than 100, such as electrical appliances for the aundry and kitchen, home entertainment, ameras, printers, computers and cars over $10,000 in Queensland). Simply phone CHOICE Shopper on 1300 360 655 (during usiness hours) with your member number, he product you want to buy (with model umber) and the best price you've found.*

Thumbs up!

- When the leather on the tongue of her walking shoes started peeling off, Pat Morris of Perth phoned Pacific Brands Footwear and was impressed by the service she received. Not only did Jessica, in customer service, arrange for the shoes to be replaced, she also asked whether to send the old ones back to Pat "for gardening in" – yes, please!
- Sally Bayne, via email, told us of her 90-year-old father, who had only recently gone from driving a car to buzzing around on a mobility scooter. He was concerned he'd be in trouble if it broke down or the battery ran out. But RACQ allayed his worries, sending him stickers with its phone number and advising him they'd take him and his scooter home anytime, all covered by its 24-hour breakdown service on mobility scooters.
- When the spray mechanism inside the 50mL bottle of her Chanel No 5 Eau de Parfum broke off, Christine Crich of Sylvania, NSW, took it to David Jones, Miranda, and asked for help. With no proof of purchase, and no idea of where and when her husband had bought the perfume (a birthday gift) more than three years ago, she was more than surprised when she received a brand new replacement bottle in exchange.

Address your letters to ***Thumbs up!*** *at the address below.*

LETTER OF THE MONTH

Accessing money from First Home Saver Account

PHOTO COURTESY OF ANWEN

Your article on the First Home Saver Account scheme (*CHOICE*, December 2008/January 2009) says there is a way you can open an account for just over two years and still comply with the rules. I hold such an account with Members Equity, but was given different advice.

Members Equity told me that even if I make the required payment at the beginning of the fourth financial year, the government does not make the contribution until the end of that financial year, and so I would only be able to close my account after this time.

If the FHSA works like the superannuation co-contribution scheme (where the government only pays its contributions in December, after the end of the financial year when your tax return has been processed), this means you may have to hold the account for four-and-a-half years.

This makes a big difference to people who want to gain the benefits of the account but also want to purchase a home in the near future. Can you provide any further information to clarify how closing the account works, and when this is able to happen?
Anwen Krause-Heuer, via email

CHOICE says *When we contacted Members Equity about this issue, the tax office regulations on this scheme were still being drafted. Members Equity said that if you close your FHSA in July and have contributed $1000 in the current and each of the three preceding financial years to that date, the FHSA scheme's requirements will be met. But the government's final contribution payment, may be delayed, as it won't be made until certain conditions are met.*

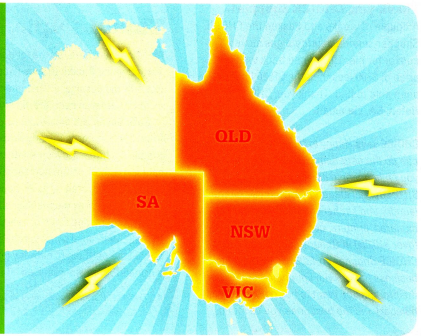
In the meantime the Australian Taxation Office advised that "government contributions are paid after the account provider has lodged an annual FHSA activity report and the individual has lodged their income tax return. If they don't need to lodge a tax return, they provide a notification of eligibility." These contributions must be paid within 60 days of receipt of those two records, and the final one, if paid out after an FHSA is closed, is paid directly to the individual account holder.

To thank you for taking the time to write to us, CHOICE awards a prize of a CHOICE book to the 'Letter of the month'. This month's winner receives *How to Clean Practically Anything*, or any other book of her choice from the list on choice.com.au/books. We're sorry we don't have the resources to answer all your letters personally, and in the magazine we may edit them or print only an extract.

Email ausconsumer@choice.com.au or mail to:
Letters, CHOICE, 57 Carrington Road, Marrickville 2204

Power play

Competition is hotting up in the power industry. CHOICE surveyed the four most competitive states to see what drives consumers to switch electricity retailers and how the companies measure up.



nutshell

- Highly competitive electricity markets in some states have prompted unprecedented levels of consumer switching.
- Our survey reveals that discounts, offers and cheaper prices are the key drivers for switching, yet customer satisfaction often remains largely the same.

With the increased cost of power generation, household bills are set to rise nationally over the next few years and consumers will be on the lookout for cheaper energy prices. In states where the utilities market has been fully deregulated, allowing numerous energy retailers to fiercely compete for customers, marketing – predominantly door-to-door and telemarketing – has been particularly intense.

A recent CHOICE survey of 3300 subscribers found that discounts and freebies have been remarkably effective in enticing consumers to switch electricity retailers, and aggressive selling techniques have had a large role to play. In fact, Australians who have an opportunity to switch have done so more than five million times since full retail competition was introduced in 2002.

We surveyed consumers in markets with full retail competition – Victoria, SA, NSW and Queensland – to find out why they switched, and if it led to higher customer satisfaction. Those in states where competition is not significant were not surveyed, as there is little or no option to switch (see Different States, Different Markets, page 15, for an overview of the various state energy markets).

Biggest is not always best

More than half of our 3300 survey respondents obtain electricity from the three major retailers, Origin Energy, AGL Energy and EnergyAustralia, yet these ranked in the bottom half of all energy companies for satisfaction (see table, page 14). Origin and AGL are privately owned and active in all four states, while NSW government-owned EnergyAustralia does not operate in SA. Of the three, AGL had the lowest satisfaction rating (52%), with price being the biggest issue.

Overall, price dissatisfaction – specifically, high and/or disputed bills – was consumers' biggest gripe, which is consistent with complaints recorded by the various state energy and water ombudsman offices. In the six months to June 2008, billing made up 50% of all cases brought to the Victorian office, more than doubling from 5041 to 10,440 cases. In the NSW office, billing comprised 29% of complaints lodged, and in SA it was 40%.

Our survey showed that close to 60% of the 1267 respondents who switched retailers at least once changed from the three biggest retailers. Discounts, offers and promotions were the key motivators.

HOW WE SURVEYED

In December 2008, we emailed 30,000 of our subscribers in Victoria, SA, NSW and Queensland, inviting them to take part in an online electricity survey. We excluded gas, as the electricity market was the more competitive of the two. More than 3300 subscribers responded to questions that asked them:

- to rate their satisfaction with their current electricity retailer in terms of pricing and customer service
- whether they had switched to another retailer, as well as why and how they did so
- whether the ability to switch to another retailer had resulted in more or less satisfaction.

Victorious Victoria

Victoria is the most competitive market for electricity in Australia. Since 2002, about 2.8 million Victorians have switched retailers. The state has 14 active electricity retailers – the highest of all states – vying for new customers, setting precedents in offering DVD players and even football club memberships in SA (see below) to entice consumers to sign up with them.

Our survey showed Victorians are much more likely to be approached by door-to-door salespeople and telemarketers than those living in NSW, SA or Queensland. In the last 12 months, seven out of 10 Victorian respondents were door-knocked at least once, and a staggering 26% at least four times; close to 20% who switched did so through a door-to-door salesperson. About 11% received more than five calls from telemarketers in 12 months.

This aggressive marketing seems to work: 47% of Victorian respondents who switched felt some degree of pressure to do so. Close to half switched because >

41% The percentage of survey respondents who said discounts, offers and promotions from a rival retailer made them switch.

WHY ARE ENERGY PRICES RISING?

National electricity bills rose sharply in 2007 – in Victoria up to 17% – as the drought across eastern Australia reduced the output from hydro-electricity plants. More expensive gas-fired generators were used to produce electricity instead.

But there is more to high prices than the drought, says Roman Domanski, executive director of the Energy Users Association of Australia (EUAA). The EUAA commissioned an independent investigation in 2007, which found that a lack of rational water policy and planning, as well as opportunistic bidding by electricity wholesalers, contributed significantly to high prices. Opportunistic bidding occurs when generators withdraw supply and then re-offer power to the market at increased prices.

Domanski told CHOICE that wholesale prices, high network costs and steep costs associated with renewable energy will force prices up. He estimated wholesale power prices – 40% of what makes up your electricity bills – will rise by 10% in 2010 and a further 16% in 2011, even before carbon and renewable energy prices are factored in.

In January, Queensland Electricity raised prices by up to 24%, while the Australian Energy Regulator has given the green light for prices in NSW to increase by as much as 10%. The federal government's Carbon Pollution Reduction Scheme will increase electricity costs by 1.1% in 2010-11.

"It is very difficult to forecast precisely the overall percentage increase in prices for consumers in each state, as power costs are comprised of several components and they vary from state to state," says Domanski. "Competition can help to moderate the price, but my concern is that there's still limited price competition, even in Victoria. Generators who are also retailers have too much market power and limit the extent of competition in the market. There is no doubt prices are going one way – up."

Generators sell power at wholesale prices in the National Energy Market. Retailers then buy electricity and package it for sale to consumers. AGL Energy, for example, is both a power generator and retailer and has a big share of the market in Victoria.

'It is very difficult to forecast precisely the overall percentage increase in prices ... but there is no doubt prices are going one way – up.'

Free footy membership sways loyal customer

PHOTO COURTESY OF DONALD

Competition in the electricity market has spurred a flood of discounts, promotions and offers to entice consumers to switch retailers. DVD players, discounts of up to 10% for paying on time and/or free electricity for one month comprise the usual bait. Loyalty retainers, such as movie tickets and vouchers, may also be mailed to you towards the end of your contract with your retailer.

Any deal you get will depend on how aggressive you are when negotiating with a retailer. Former AGL customer and *CHOICE* subscriber Donald McKinnon, from Adelaide, received an offer from Origin Energy to pay $100 of his football club membership – about 40% of the overall fee – if he signed up with them. "I called AGL and told them I was prepared to stay with them if they could match the offer, but they were simply not interested," he says. "So I signed up with Origin and have stayed with them since. It is good marketing because I'm passionate about my footy."

In 2005, SA took top spot in the world for switching, with close to 40% of its consumers switching retailers. There are currently 11 electricity retailers in SA, including active retailer AGL Energy, vying for a market of 800,000 customers, about one-third the size of Victoria.

In 2007, South Australia followed Victoria as having the highest rate of energy switching in the world.

< they were offered discounts and freebies – and the competition is likely to intensify. The Consumer Action Law Centre is concerned that aggressive, sometimes unlawful, marketing is driving the market, instead of consumers making informed choices.

To stimulate competitive pricing, government monitoring of electricity and gas prices – found in standard contracts – was abolished for the first time earlier this year, in Victoria. This removed protection for consumers who were on such contracts, as power rates can now be set by retailers without government regulation, similar to market contracts. So now, customers who elect to stay on standard contracts with their retailer may be paying more than if they shopped around. This makes the option of switching retailers for a better deal more attractive than ever, especially given up to 40% of Victorian energy consumers are still on standard contracts.

You're on a standard contract if you've never negotiated a deal with your energy retailer. A market contract is a specific deal – usually with discounts and early payment rebates – sold to you by a telemarketer or door-to-door salesperson.

To offset these changes and make the new pricing transparent, all retailers are now obliged to publish a range of offers on their website and in newspapers so that consumers can compare and make informed choices. Consumers who do not have web access can also call retailers and ask for their price plans.

Fiona McLeod, Energy and Water Ombudsman (Victoria), told CHOICE she expected to see complaints about high bills where customers are not aware of price rises in standard contracts. "Pricing is not within our jurisdiction, but we can investigate whether enough pricing information was provided to the consumer," she says.

How the change affects the pushy sales drive, however, remains to be seen. "Cases relating to marketing and transfer are often systemic in nature, and an unknown factor is how many people were unhappy about the marketing directed at them but who did not complain," says McLeod.

PHOTO COURTESY OF KEN

$300 in hidden fees

Ken Harvey bought into a dual fuel (power and gas) deal offered by a door-to-door AGL Energy salesman in July 2008. The offer details signed by Harvey includes a 7% discount off his bills and a $50 voucher that could only be used with a $400 purchase of electrical appliances from AGL Energy shops. He was also given a 35-page booklet of terms and conditions.

One month after the switch, Harvey was slapped with a $300 "cash deposit request" in his first bill for changing electricity and gas suppliers. The fee was neither mentioned by the salesman, nor stated in the offer details. Harvey refused to pay and called AGL. "Both customer representatives I spoke to agreed the charge was inappropriate. One said he would take action to deal with it and would also pass on my complaint," says Harvey.

However, the matter wasn't settled. In January 2009 he received a reminder to pay the $300, with a warning that access to his utilities would be restricted if he didn't. Calling AGL again, a customer service supervisor said the charge should have been declared upfront and stated in the offer details, but still insisted he pay. She also told him he had a 10-day cooling-off period (even though the fee arrived in his bill a month after he had switched) and pointed him to a condition in the terms and conditions booklet for this fee. Upon checking he only found terms pertaining to a "debt collection fee".

Harvey escalated the matter to the Energy and Water Ombudsman Victoria (EWOV). After EWOV contacted AGL Energy, it waived the $300 fee. Harvey said AGL's marketing was "misleading and deceptive" under the Trade Practices Act. The Essential Services Commission's Code of Conduct for Marketing Retail Energy in Victoria states that retailers must clearly declare all charges to customers when offering contracts. When contacted, AGL declined to comment on this case until EWOV has concluded its investigation.

ELECTRICITY RETAILERS – CUSTOMER SATISFACTION

RETAILER (in rank order, with number of respondents in brackets)	Overall rating (%)	Price satisfaction (%)	Customer service satisfaction (%)	Ease of understanding bills score (%)
Red Energy (49)	69	66	68	74
Simply Energy (58)	67	64	65	71
Jackgreen Energy (42)	62	54	62	69
TRUenergy (207)	62	54	63	68
Victoria Electricity (65)	62	62	62	63
Country Energy (163)	61	47	68	67
Integral Energy (198)	61	48	65	69
Energy Australia (391)	59	46	66	66
Ergon Energy (183)	59	42	67	69
Origin Energy (648)	56	46	56	65
AGL Energy (545)	52	42	53	60
Other companies (110*)	61	54	63	66
ALL COMPANIES (2659**)	58	47	60	66

USING THE TABLE

The overall score is an average of the ratings provided by survey respondents, who were asked to rate electricity companies from "excellent" to "very poor" for:

- Satisfaction with prices
- Satisfaction with customer service
- Ease of understanding bills

TABLE NOTES

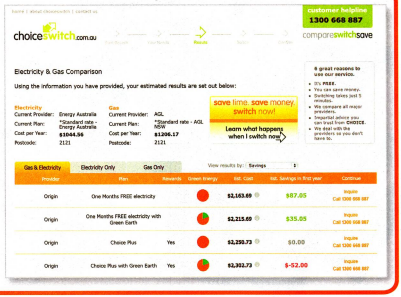
** Includes all other suppliers with fewer than 40 survey respondents.*
*** This is smaller than the total number of survey respondents as some respondents did not answer all questions or rate the companies.*

If you're thinking of switching, it pays to look closely at what is on offer to make sure you get the best deal in the long term.

WE CAN HELP

Increasing energy prices and a more competitive market have provided tempting offers to switch. CHOICE's free compare-and-switch service provides the resources you need to make an informed decision. Simply key in your postcode to find out what deals are offered for electricity, gas or a dual-fuel package by retailers in your area. Depending where you live, a full switching service may be available. Visit www.choiceswitch.com.au or call 1300 668 887.

choiceswitch.com.au



66% Respondents who switched and rated satisfaction with their new supplier as about the same as the old one.

46% The percentage of those who switched who felt some degree of pressure to switch.

Does switching always mean greater satisfaction?

When asked to compare their satisfaction with the new electricity company with their previous one, 66% of all respondents who switched said they were neither better nor worse off. Overall, about one-quarter said they were better off and only 9% said they were worse off.

In Victoria and SA one-third of the switchers surveyed said they felt better off compared with 6% and 7% respectively, who felt worse off after switching.

Different states, different markets

Different levels of price capping, state government involvement and industry competition have created very different market forces across the four deregulated states.

NSW and Victoria, for example, were both deregulated in 2002, but spirited competition in Victoria has spurred a much higher switch rate than in NSW, where the state government owns the main generation plants and retail companies EnergyAustralia, Country Energy and Integral Energy. The seven new entrants in NSW have only acquired about 14% of the small customer market from the government incumbents. Despite this, it's not yet clear whether competition truly benefits consumers in the electricity market.

In the *2007 World Energy Market Retail Rankings*, SA came a close second to Victoria in having the highest switching rate in the world, followed by NSW in fifth place and Queensland in seventh. All four states ranked higher than the UK, Sweden, Germany and New York among the 22 markets ranked. The rankings were part of the Utility Customer Switching Research Project, an international group monitoring switch rates and trends in fully deregulated global energy retail markets.

Our survey results are consistent with these findings, with about 50% of respondents in Victoria and SA having switched at least once in the past five years, compared with 30% in NSW and 37% in Queensland.

States where competition is not significant were not included in the survey. The ACT government operates a joint venture with the private sector to provide retail services, while WA, Tasmania and the NT retain government control in the retail sector. ■

CHOICE verdict

Competition between energy retailers is intensifying, providing greater options for switching, but it pays to look closely at exactly what is on offer to ensure you get the best deal in the long term. Liberalisation of the energy market, which gives consumers strong incentives to shop around, also creates incentives for retailers to use aggressive marketing. Consumers can sign up to bad deals, and in some cases they're "signed up" to deals without their knowledge by overenthusiastic salespeople. While removal of the price cap on standard contracts in Victoria may stimulate competition, it will certainly leave some customers paying more than they should.

Beauty by design

CHOICE investigates the growing cosmetic surgery industry and uncovers some disturbingly unprofessional practices.

nutshell

- The difference between a plastic surgeon and a cosmetic surgeon can be up to eight years of specialist training.
- The cosmetic surgery industry is largely unregulated, so how do you work out who is most suitable for your needs?

Among the latest promotions for cosmetic surgery procedures are "Need a lift?" and "Beautiful breasts always get noticed!". From print ads and radio spots to glossy magazines dedicated to promoting the latest surgical techniques, cosmetic surgery has never been more in our faces – and the industry is growing at a rapid rate. Although no formal statistics have been collected on the number of procedures taking place in Australia, experts estimate more than 1000 practitioners perform cosmetic procedures regularly.

Popular as it is, however, cosmetic surgery is far less regulated than other areas of medicine – and as CHOICE discovered, some surgeons seem to be getting away all too easily with some alarmingly unprofessional conduct.

Clear as mud?

While most practitioners regularly describe themselves as either plastic surgeons or cosmetic surgeons, in some cases the difference can be up to eight years of additional training for plastic surgeons (see Who Should I Choose? page 19). Despite the popularity of cosmetic procedures and increasing competitiveness of the industry, in Australia there is no regulatory body. Instead, there is a range of medical colleges and associations all claiming to offer training and qualifications for doctors providing a range of cosmetic procedures. Currently, any medical doctor or specialist can perform cosmetic procedures, as it is not recognised as a medical specialty by the Australian Medical Council. However plastic surgery is recognised as a specialty, and members of the Australian Society of Plastic Surgeons are highly trained, members also of the Royal College of Surgeons, and perform both reconstructive and cosmetic procedures. The non-regulation of this growing area of cosmetic medicine is compounded by profuse marketing, following the legalisation of advertising for medical practitioners in 1994.

In 1999, the NSW government commissioned an inquiry into the cosmetic surgery arena; 10 years later, most of the subsequent key recommendations have still not been implemented.

CHANGE NOW, PAY LATER

Cosmetic surgery can be very expensive, and is not covered by Medicare or many private health insurers if it is being undertaken for aesthetic reasons only.

A number of finance companies and brokers are targeting potential cosmetic surgery patients with expensive loan offers. So if you're in a hurry to have a procedure done, perhaps you're thinking a loan is the answer? Perhaps not. Cosmetic surgery loans can be far more expensive than a low-rate credit card. Mediplan charges an interest rate of 16.9% for members and 17.9% for non-members, including a 7% processing fee (up to a maximum of $295). For an operation costing $4000, the fee would be $280.

Both the Australian Society of Plastic Surgeons and Consumer Action Law Centre (CALC) are critical of these schemes. "If you buy a car on finance, if you can't afford the repayments at least you might be able to give it back to help pay your debt," says Carolyn Bond from the CALC. "But what do you do with a breast implant?"

Shadow shop: breast augmentation, liposuction and Botox

To find out how some cosmetic surgery clinics operate, CHOICE recruited three women as shadow shoppers. They visited cosmetic surgery clinics in Sydney and Brisbane, requesting consultations for breast augmentation, liposuction and Botox, and reported back on their experiences. We then formally invited members of the Australian Society of Plastic Surgeons (ASPS) to give expert opinions on how these consultations were conducted.

Breast augmentation

Breast augmentation is one of the most popular cosmetic procedures, as well as one of the most emotive. Our shadow shopper visited 12 clinics and uncovered some appalling examples of unprofessional behaviour, including being shown the breasts of one of the sales consultants as an example of the doctor's work; being told by one doctor that she "needed" to have the surgery done; being offered a discount if she agreed to have "before" and "after" photos of her breasts published on the internet; and even being told that if she had her breasts enlarged it would increase her chances of finding a partner!

All this aside, our ASPS experts rated overall explanation of the procedure's potential risks as particularly bad. Our shadow shopper was not totally informed by the doctors about dangers such as haematoma, infection, leakage or scarring. Some did not even ask why she was considering the treatment. Only seven checked her weight, while only two clinics provided evidence of accreditation when asked (another had a certificate in the waiting room).

In a few instances our shadow shopper also felt she was being pushed into making a decision, and three times was offered brochures about credit without asking (see Change Now, Pay Later, opposite).

Liposuction

Liposuction is another popular procedure, but also one of the most dangerous. In February 2008, a young Adelaide woman died after having liposuction, as did a Melbourne woman in 2007. Liposuction usually involves pumping the "problem" area with liquid before sucking fat out of the body. It can be painful and requires a high level of post-operative care.

Our shadow shopper was rated by ASPS experts as a poor candidate for liposuction – they suggested she would need to lose weight first and that an abdominoplasty (tummy tuck) would probably be more suitable. She visited 14 cosmetic surgery clinics, and while our experts felt some of her consultations were reasonable, as some cosmetic surgeons suggested abdominoplasty by a plastic surgeon, most also suggested she consider having liposuction in other areas of her body. One doctor suggested other cosmetic procedures to improve her appearance, such as removing fat from her chin and another doctor suggested removing some moles and skin tags, even though she didn't request them.

While the general advice about liposuction was sound, not all the doctors said how many surgeries they had performed – and even when they did it was very vague. Very few doctors mentioned their actual qualifications and accreditations, hence placing the onus on the patient to do all the asking.

Botox

Botox doesn't involve surgery and nowadays seems an everyday treatment, even on offer at so-called "Botox parties" held in private homes. Despite this image, it is still a risky procedure and not suitable for all candidates. It's also critical that potential clients are questioned thoroughly before undertaking the treatment, particularly if there is a possibility the patient is pregnant; an Australian baby was born with severe defects possibly as a result of the mother using a virtually identical treatment to Botox in her first week of pregnancy.

Our ASPS experts didn't consider the shadow shopper a suitable candidate for Botox and suggested other alternatives would work better for the deep line on her forehead. She visited 12 cosmetic clinics and received varying advice. One doctor said Botox would not be suitable as she would be unable to use her eyebrows to express herself, instead recommending a filler, which our experts felt was reasonable advice. However, nine doctors recommended both a filler and Botox. Six recommended a brow lift (along with Botox or a filler), which the experts considered reasonable. >

Cosmetic surgery is far less regulated than other areas of medicine, and profuse marketing compounds this non-regulation.

To protect consumers, CHOICE wants to see more regulation of the cosmetic surgery industry.

While most of the advice she received was acceptable, discussion of risks in all the consultations was minimal. The amount and location of the injections varied widely between consultations. Our experts assessed that one doctor would be injecting in the wrong area of the face, while another told the shadow shopper that Botox wouldn't fix her problem, yet offered the service anyway.

Overall, the results of our shadow shop are concerning. Without discussing risks, it's extremely difficult for a potential patient to make an informed decision. There were also some important questions that some cosmetic surgeons did not ask the shadow shoppers, which are critical to ensure the patient's safety.

Some of the shadow shoppers also said they felt rushed through their consultations, and that some practitioners lost interest quickly when it became clear they weren't a suitable candidate for a procedure. One doctor even took phone calls to arrange a golf game during a consultation!

PHOTO COURTESY OF KAY

'Everyone's reaction is different'

When Kay from Queensland started developing slight jowls at the age of 36, she decided to try a cosmetic procedure. She began to research her options but found information provided by the colleges and organisations too overwhelming. She then investigated the website of a cosmetic surgeon who regularly advertises in the newspaper.

Happy with the information she found, Kay made an appointment with the doctor to discuss her options. He suggested a threadlift, which was described as less invasive than a facelift and involved pulling back sagging skin via a series of small threads attached under the skin.

Kay was quoted $5000 for the work and decided to go ahead with it despite her disappointment with the doctor's manner. "I would have liked a more personal connection. It was very much like he was thinking 'just show me the money'."

Despite being told the procedure was minimally invasive, Kay was alarmed by how much swelling developed afterwards. When she returned to the doctor she found him dismissive, saying only that "everyone's reaction is different".

Three years later, Kay says she is very unhappy with the results. "I have noticeable skin folds behind my ears, which the doctor told me would settle down, and every now and then I have a 'pinging' sensation in my temple, possibly as a result of one of the threads retracting. But I don't want to go back to a doctor who will just tell me it's a reaction and everyone is different. I thought the whole thing would be seamless and unnoticeable, but that hasn't been the case."

QUESTIONS TO ASK IF YOU'RE CONSIDERING COSMETIC SURGERY

Before you arrive at a consultation it's important to be prepared. Take a list of questions to ask the doctor. Below are just some examples.

- What are your qualifications and experience?
- How many times have you performed the procedure?
- How many times have you performed it in the past six months?
- Can I speak to previous patients?
- Are there any complications associated with the procedure?
- If complications do occur or the procedure is not successful, how will you deal with this?
- Where will the surgery be performed?
- Will a qualified anaesthetist administer the anaesthetic and/or sedative medication?
- Will I need time off work?
- Are there other post-operative side-effects?
- Will there be any visible scarring following the procedure? How can this be minimised?
- What aftercare will be provided and will this be included in the treatment costs?

THE WHO'S WHO OF THE COSMETIC SURGERY INDUSTRY

- **Australian Society of Plastic Surgeons (ASPS)** This is a not-for-profit membership organisation representing plastic surgeons in Australia. Plastic surgery incorporates both reconstructive and cosmetic surgery. Members must be Fellows of the Royal Australasian College of Surgeons (FRACS), have completed specialist surgeon training in plastic surgery and must adhere to a strict code of ethics.

- **Australasian College of Cosmetic Surgery (ACCS)** Previously, to enter the field of cosmetic surgery a medical practitioner would have to do so on an apprenticeship basis (not subject to any quality controls), resulting in varying quality of results. The ACCS was set up in 1999 to fill the gap in differences in quality of cosmetic surgeons, and has an accrediting medical faculty although it is not recognised specialist training.

- **Fellow of the Royal Australasian College of Surgeons (FRACS)** This training is recognised by the Australian Medical Council, which is authorised by the federal government to certify medical training.

Who should I choose?

In this fiercely competitive industry, CHOICE discovered intense rivalry between the two main industry associations, the Australian Society of Plastic Surgeons (ASPS) and the Australasian College of Cosmetic Surgery (ACCS). Both vehemently put their case to us, but it is up to consumers to decide which is the best option for them.

Plastic surgeons undertake a minimum of seven years of additional training once they have obtained their medical degree and most likely become members of the ASPS, which provides specific guidelines to which practitioners must adhere. Plastic surgeons are also Fellows of the Royal Australasian College of Surgeons, which awards them the status of specialist.

The ASPS claims many doctors without specialist training are doing complex cosmetic surgery procedures and advertising themselves as leaders in their field. ASPS President Dr Howard Webster says there is nothing illegal about a GP undertaking surgical work so long as they disclose that information to the patient, but stresses the benefits of specialist training. "If you train in a certain area then you should probably work in that area. You would probably use an orthopaedic surgeon to do hip surgery on you instead of a GP."

Cosmetic surgeons The Australasian College of Cosmetic Surgery (ACCS) was established in 1999, stating that its purpose is to fill a gap by providing training and representation for a range of doctors with varying qualifications who have an interest in cosmetic surgery. To qualify as a Fellow of the ACCS, members must be "at least five years postgraduate" and have worked for a minimum of three years in a surgical environment. The college then provides two years of specialist training, and members are audited annually.

ACCS President Dr Daniel Fleming argues that "cosmetic surgery is already an area of specialised practice and the only area of medicine practised by a range of doctors from diverse specialty groups from GPs, dermatologists to ear nose and throat specialists, all of whom are united by the fact they conduct cosmetic medical practice".

In late 2008 the ACCS announced it would be mandatory for its members to disclose how many times they had performed a particular procedure at the initial consultation, if fewer than 100 times. It is also awaiting a decision on an application it made in 2007 to the Australian Medical Council to have cosmetic surgery recognised as a medial specialty.

In the meantime there have been a few small positive developments for consumers, with the Victorian government banning "before" and "after" photographs in advertising, while in Queensland the term "surgeon" can only be used by Fellows of the Royal Australasian College of Surgeons. While both major industry associations (ASPS and ACCS) have their own guidelines, as does the NSW Medical Board, these are not enforceable. ■

A potential patient should always first check the cosmetic surgeon's training and experience before deciding to go under the knife.

CHOICE verdict

Considering how easily a doctor can open and operate a cosmetic surgery without specialist training, if you choose to go to a cosmetic surgeon, you need to be clear that you may not be seeing a specialist in the field. At the very least, make sure he or she is a member of the Australasian College of Cosmetic Surgery.

As there is no industry regulation, unfortunately it is still up to consumers to assess the cosmetic surgeon and clinic after asking questions and doing their own research. A potential patient should always check the qualifications and experience of the cosmetic surgeon, as well as the number of surgical procedures he or she has performed, before deciding to go under the knife.

Given the risks if a cosmetic procedure goes wrong, CHOICE would like to see more regulation of this industry to protect consumers.

Juicy hype

Are fruit juices that contain extra antioxidants or herbal supplements really any better for you than traditional juice? CHOICE discovers that their claims simply don't stack up.

nutshell

- It's not worth paying extra for fruit juices with antioxidants or herbal supplements.
- Most brands do not have sufficient quantity of these extras to do you any good – and some of them raise safety concerns.

The names are evocative – "Kickstart", "Energy Lift", "Green Recovery" – and the claims beguiling: "Helping you move into a wellness approach"; "Could help turbo-charge your life"; "Good for both body and soul".

Fruit juices with exotic supplements have spread from juice bars onto the supermarket shelves. But are these juices with feel-good extras really better for you than straight juice? And more importantly, are they really worth the extra money you pay for them?

Reality check

CHOICE scoured the major supermarkets for refrigerated fruit juices promoting the virtues of herbal supplements, such as echinacea, ginseng or ginkgo, or boasting antioxidants or omega-3s. These juices are listed in the table on page 22. We then compared the claims on the labels with what these juices actually contain.

Most of the claims turn out to be little more than marketing hype. These juices are usually just apple juice (which is often the cheapest available) with a few extras. Straight juice is just as good for you – and cheaper.

GO FOR 2 & 5

We should all be aiming to eat at least two portions of fruit and five of vegetables each day. And the greater variety you include the better, because different fruits and vegetables contain different nutrients. But no matter how much you drink you cannot count juice as more than one portion a day, because you don't get the same nutritional benefits from juice as from whole fruit and vegetables.

When juice is extracted from the whole fruit or vegetable the processing reduces the fibre content and releases fructose, a sugar that can damage teeth, especially if you drink juices frequently. For more information, go to www.gorfor2and5.com.au

Herbal supplements

CHOICE looked at juices that contain aloe vera, echinacea, ginkgo, ginseng, spirulina, barleygrass and/or wheatgrass. There's very little scientific evidence that these herbal supplements confer any real health benefits. What's more, other than Morlife Elixir Punch Aloe Klenz, none of the juices comes even close to a full dose of whichever herbal supplement they specify on the label.

One serving of Berri Superjuice Immune, for example, gives you only 16% of the recommended daily dose of echinacea, and the same brand's Kickstart gives you only 3% of the recommended doses of ginseng and ginkgo (see the table, page 22, for details). You wouldn't take only 16% of your blood pressure medication, equally there is no reason to expect any benefit from such small amounts of these medicinal herbs. And even these dose levels don't have the status of recommended daily intakes (RDI) for vitamins, as RDIs are established by health authorities.

Looked at another way, it's just as well most are at such low levels – after all, they may be "natural" but they're not necessarily safe. Ginkgo can interfere with other medications such as anticoagulants (blood thinners), while ginseng shouldn't be consumed during pregnancy and only in small doses if you have high blood pressure.

Our food regulator, Food Standards Australia New Zealand, considered regulating the use of medicinal herbs in foods, but has abandoned the idea. In CHOICE's view, their use in all foods should be prohibited unless specific approval is given after appropriate safety assessment.

Did you know?

Fruit juice is a healthy and convenient product, but if you're watching your weight keep in mind that a glass of juice (200mL) gives you more flab-forming kilojoules than a beer or a can of regular Coke.

Fruit juice plus

Straight juice is just as good for you, and cheaper, than those with antioxidants, herbal and vitamin supplements.

Most juices do not come close to including a full dose of whichever supplement they claim to provide.

Antioxidants

Many of the juices we tested make bold claims about antioxidants, such as "With the extra goodness of antioxidants which work as one of the body's defences – helping protect against free radicals". There's now strong evidence that fruit and vegetables help protect against cancer, heart disease, diabetes and other health problems – and they're certainly rich in antioxidants. But the presence of antioxidants does not of itself necessarily explain the health benefits. Studies consistently find no evidence that taking antioxidant supplements, such as beta-carotene or the antioxidant vitamins added to these juices, helps prevent cancer or heart disease.

Furthermore, when it comes to antioxidants, fruit juice is a poor substitute for whole fruit. Measurements of antioxidant capacity for a range of fruit and vegetables (raw and processed) carried out by the United States Department of Agriculture consistently found the values for juice to be less than half those for the whole fruit. For more on this see Go for 2 & 5, left.

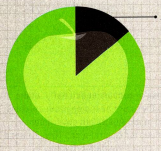
Vitamins

Many of these juices make much of the vitamins they contain – in particular, that they contain at least enough vitamin C per serving to meet the recommended daily intake (RDI). But vitamin C is a relatively cheap chemical that's added to fruit juices (and many other foods) as an antioxidant and preservative (you'll see it listed in the ingredients as "ascorbic acid, 300"). There's little point in making a virtue out of a standard food manufacturing practice, so we don't include vitamin C claims in our table.

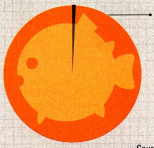
The other added vitamins claimed for these juices are A and E. None of the juices, however, gives more than 25% of the RDI per serving as this is the maximum amount manufacturers are allowed to add. While juice can make a useful contribution to your daily vitamin intake, why not get vitamins from foods naturally rich in them? For vitamin A, try eggs and vegetables, especially the orange and yellow ones; for vitamin E, wheatgerm is one of the richest sources, as well as eggs, tuna, avocados and broccoli.

And ignore the hype – there's no scientific evidence that vitamin supplements help prevent cancer or heart disease. >

Whole food equivalents



Apple juice has only 14% of the antioxidant capacity you'd get from eating an apple.



One serving of Berri Australia Fresh Omega-3 for Heart and Mind gives you only 1% of the amount of omega-3s you'd get from a serving (140g) of Atlantic salmon.

Source: US Department of Agriculture and CHOICE.

Fish still remains the best source for your daily intake of omega-3 fatty acids.

< Omega-3s

Berri Australian Fresh Omega-3 for Heart and Mind Extra Pulpy Orange claims to have "combined Australia's finest fruits with ingredients from natural sources to help you boost your daily omega-3 intake". There's now good evidence that omega-3 fatty acids can reduce your risk of heart disease, and may be good for our brains as well.

Fish, however, is always the best source. The Berri juice is spiked with fish oil but one serving gives you only 50mg of omega-3s – 1% of the amount you'd get from a serving of Atlantic salmon. And a serving of the juice gives men only 8% of the Heart Foundation's recommended daily dose of omega-3s – a long way short of the "over 30% of your daily needs" claimed on the label. (Women need less, but even then a serving of the juice only delivers 12% of their RDI.) Berri told us that the "30%" refers only to "adequate intake" – not to the recommended daily dose as you might expect from the wording on the label. ■

Did you know ?

Australians have quite a thirst for fruit juice. Collectively we drink about 400 million litres a year – on average that's 100 glasses each – or 160 Olympic-sized swimming pools.

FRUIT JUICES WITH SUPPLEMENTS

Brand / juice (in alphabetical order within groups)	Herbal supplement or vitamin	Amount of supplement per 200 mL (mg)	Recommended daily dose for herbal supplements or recommended daily intake for vitamins (mg)	Price per litre ($)
HERBAL SUPPLEMENTS				
Berri Australian Fresh Antiox for Immune System Breakfast Fruits	Echinacea	200	18,000	4.29
Berri Australian Fresh Omega-3 for Heart & Mind Extra Pulpy Orange	Omega-3	40	600	3.99
Berri Superjuice Green Zone	Barleygrass	1000	30,000	3.99
	Spirulina	2000	3000	3.99
	Wheatgrass	1000	30,000	3.99
Berri Superjuice Immune	Echinacea	240	18,000	3.99
Berri Superjuice Kickstart	Ginkgo	250	7500	3.99
	Ginseng	100	1000	3.99
Boost Green Recovery	Wheatgrass	600	3000	8.26
Morlife Elixir Punch Aloe Klenz	Aloe vera	30000	20,000	13.16
VITAMINS				
Berri Australian Fresh Antiox for Immune System Breakfast Fruits	Vitamin A	0.2	0.9	4.29
	Vitamin E	2	10	4.29
Berri Multi-V	Vitamin A	0.1	0.9	5.48
	Vitamin E	1	10	5.48
Boost Energy Lift	Vitamin A	0.2	0.9	8.26
Daily Juice Company Plus Antioxidants Apple & Mixed Berries	Vitamin A	0.2	0.9	2.85
Daily Juice Company Plus Antioxidants Orchard Fruits	Vitamin A	0.2	0.9	2.85
Daily Juice Company Plus Antioxidants Tropical Fruits	Vitamin A	0.2	0.9	2.85

USING THE TABLE

Herbal supplement or vitamin These are the extra ingredients identified from the ingredients list on the label. Some juices have more than one supplement or vitamin, which are listed separately.

Amount of supplement per 200mL Manufacturers' recommended serving sizes vary. As a basis for comparison we calculated the amount of supplement per 200mL (the most frequently recommended serving size).

Recommended daily dose or recommended daily intake For herbal supplements these are based on product labels; for vitamins we referred to the Australian government's "Nutrient Reference Values for Australia and New Zealand".

Price per litre Based on prices we paid in Sydney in November 2008.

The great credit protection sham

Credit protection insurance makes an easy dollar for lenders and insurers, but for consumers there are far smarter options.

nutshell

- Credit protection is a largely hidden insurance, which covers your debt and repayments if you die, become sick or lose your job.
- CHOICE found credit protection insurance is disproportionately expensive compared with life insurance.

In this era of financial uncertainty, an insurance that at first glance seems cheap, convenient and promises to cover your loan repayments against potential disasters such as unemployment or sickness appears too good to be true. Unfortunately, CHOICE has found it really is. Our investigation concludes that credit protection insurance is a rip-off, as other options give you far better and cheaper cover.

What is credit protection insurance?

Credit protection insurance (also called consumer credit insurance) covers your credit card, home loan or personal loan debt and repayments in the event of your death, terminal illness, disablement or unemployment. It is generally available with a mortgage, personal loan or credit card, is optional and in no way connected to mortgage insurance, which is usually compulsory if you have a home loan deposit of less than 20%. It tends to be offered as a package, such as combined disablement and unemployment covers.

If your claim is accepted, your debt is usually covered in the case of death or terminal illness and the repayments for disablement or unemployment. However, there are plenty of hidden catches and traps.

$251 million Credit protection premiums paid to insurance companies in the 12 months to December 2007.

$38 million Paid out in claims by insurance companies in the 12 months to December 2007.

Why is credit protection a rort?

- It's very expensive: for a similar premium you can buy $500,000 life insurance or credit protection insurance worth only $2500. The life insurance policy would leave your family 200 times better off in the case of your death.
- Only 1% of policyholders make a claim, compared with 13% of car insurance and 9% of sickness and accident insurance policyholders.
- About 12 out of 100 claims are rejected, which is much higher than most other insurance options.
- Only 15% of premiums income is returned in claims payouts to policyholders. This makes it very profitable for insurers and lenders who usually receive a 20% commission. Other types of insurance on average use 74% of premiums for claim payouts to policyholders.

How much does it cost?

Credit card protection insurance You usually pay a percentage of your credit card balance. ANZ CreditCover Plus charges 0.79%, which is about $237 per year if you spend $2500 per month on your card, for which you receive only very little cover (see the table, Credit Card Protection Insurance, page 24).

Home loan insurance The premium is calculated as a percentage of your loan balance, which varies depending on your age. With CBA, for a $500,000 home loan over 25 years, if you're 49 years old and take cover for death, terminal illness, trauma, unemployment and disablement you pay $4680 per year for the life of the loan. This compares with an average premium amount of about $1090 through industry super funds for $500,000 life insurance (which usually includes terminal illness cover) >

In many cases, credit protection will not offer enough to cover your needs.

Hard sell

PHOTO COURTESY OF GEORGE

When George called his bank to activate his new credit card it took much longer than usual. The consumer service officer used the time to try to sell him credit protection, which he declined. However, a week later, George received a letter from his bank congratulating him for taking out cover. He soon discovered how difficult it was to get out of a contract to which he'd never agreed. He immediately called the bank to cancel but was told he had to send a letter including the certificate of insurance. The bank cancelled the contract after he sent the letter.

CHOICE has since lodged a complaint with ASIC about George's experience.

CREDIT CARD PROTECTION INSURANCE

Event	Cover	Total benefit
Involuntary unemployment	6% of the outstanding balance*	$150 for six months / $900 in total
Disability (through injury or illness)	6% of the outstanding balance*	$150 per month
Total and permanent disability	Outstanding balance*	$2500
Critical illness	Outstanding balance*	$2500
Death	Outstanding balance*	$2500
Accidental death	Outstanding balance*	$2500
Family trauma (child or spouse diagnosed with critical illness)	Lump sum	$500
Stolen card	Lump sum	$200

Based on ANZ Credit Cover Plus, where you spend $2500 per month on your credit card and pay the total balance at the due date. Annual premium is $237.

** Your actual outstanding balance is covered up to your credit limit or $50,000, whichever is the lower.*

< combined with $75,000 income protection insurance ($3125 per month for up to two years); see the table, page 25.

Personal loan protection insurance Premiums depend on variables, including loan term and amount. With Westpac, if you take out a $16,000 secured car loan over seven years you would pay $1542. The premium will be added to the loan itself, so you pay interest on it and your minimum loan repayments increase. At an interest rate of 8.49%, for example, you end up paying $2053.

Does it cover your needs?

In many cases, credit protection won't cover your needs: depending on your card balance or loan amount, the cover amounts may be too small to make a difference, see the Credit Card Protection Insurance table, above right.

If you want to provide for your dependants, simply covering your debt is usually not enough as you would need to cover other expenses, such as your children's education. Only unemployment cover is exclusively available with credit protection – but it usually only covers repayments for a few months, not your living expenses.

Instead of taking out insurance at the start of the loan, make sure you don't overcommit and talk to your lender if you become unemployed or sick. The Consumer Credit Code has hardship provisions and your lender should try to find a solution for you.

Problems with claims

Scott from Adelaide took out credit protection for a $10,000 personal loan to buy a motorbike and consolidate some debt. He paid a premium of about $1000. When he lost his job, he rang his lender to make a claim but was only able to talk to the insurer after two further calls. He had to fill out a number of forms and needed a statement from his former employer, but was uncomfortable asking for it. He was told it would take two weeks to process the claim but his lender refused to suspend his repayments until the claim was processed. Scott gave up and asked his father for a loan instead.

Only about 1% of credit protection policyholders made a claim in the 12 months to June 2006 – far fewer than with other types of insurance. In the same period, about 12 out of every 100 credit protection claims were rejected, much more than most other types of insurance (see Why Is Credit Insurance a Rort?, page 23). The reason for this is very tight exclusions in the contract. "In general, the benefits of consumer credit insurance are weighted in favour of the lender," says Ken Lockery, AMP Director Personal Wealth Protection.

Alternative strategies recommended by CHOICE

The first thing to do is have an emergency fund that you can draw on if something unexpected happens. If you have a mortgage with a redraw facility, use this to store some emergency funds. Otherwise, use a high-interest online savings account. Then consider taking out insurance to cover yourself and/or your dependants. both life insurance and income protection insurance are usually cheaper to take out with superannuation.

Life insurance is the best choice for covering dependants. As a rule of thumb, the sum insured should be 10 times your salary. However, you may need more depending on your individual circumstances – consider how much you owe, how many children you have and their age. You'll also need cover if you have a loan in joint names or someone else is guarantor for the loan. If you're single and don't have any dependants, however, you usually don't need life insurance cover even if you're in debt. As AMP's Ken Lockery says: "What can they do? It's up to the lender to see if they can recover the debt from your estate."

Income protection insurance pays up to 75% of your salary if you cannot work because of illness. Premiums vary depending on your risk factors, the waiting period until the benefit kicks in and the duration of cover, which ranges from two years up to age 65.

Trauma insurance If you're not employed because you're looking after children, you usually can't take out income protection insurance. Consider trauma insurance instead, which pays a lump sum in case you suffer one of a number of conditions, such as cancer, stroke or heart disease.

VICTIMS OF CREDIT PROTECTION

Improper selling of credit insurance is rife. Some lenders promote it heavily and it can be difficult to get out of (see Hard Sell, opposite).

Katherine Lane, Principal Solicitor at the Consumer Credit Legal Centre NSW, has seen people who have been sold credit protection insurance with unemployment cover while being unemployed at the time. This cover only applies if you have been employed for a period of time before you become unemployed, so the cover was worthless for them.

In 2005, GE Money was investigated by the Australian Securities & Investments Commission (ASIC), which found it had:

- advised customers to take out credit protection covering their death in addition to a normal life insurance policy
- routinely advised singles without dependants to take out life insurance

Subsequently, GE Money gave ASIC an enforceable undertaking to change the sales practices employed by its Hallmark insurance businesses. However, in May 2008 ASIC took action when Hallmark failed to comply.

We have received further reports about problems with GE Money. Alison from Queensland took out an interest-free deal to buy a combination microwave. On her first statement she found a charge for credit protection insurance, even though at no time during the sale was this cover explained or even mentioned to her. Alison was forced to ring GE Money and cancel the cover.

LIFE INSURANCE AND INCOME PROTECTION INSURANCE PREMIUMS			
LIFE INSURANCE – benefit $1 million			
Age (yrs)	30	40	50
Premium with super	$400	$548	$1346
Premium stand alone	$624	$764	$1897
LIFE INSURANCE – benefit $500,000			
Age (yrs)	30	40	50
Premium with super	$198	$272	$669
Premium stand alone	$368	$443	$1054
INCOME PROTECTION – benefit $6250 per month (75% of $100,000 income) for two years			
Age (yrs)	30	40	50
Premium with super	$581	$660	$831
Premium stand alone	$664	$829	$1527
IINCOME PROTECTION – benefit $3125 per month (75% of $50,000 income) for two years			
Age (yrs)	30	40	50
Premium with super	$295	$334	$420
Premium stand alone	$395	$481	$856

Based on a male, non-smoker, NSW, administrative (clerical) worker.

The premium is an average of a selection of retail insurance premiums for "Premium stand alone" and large industry super fund premiums for "Premium with super". Industry super funds chosen for life insurance have about seven million members and industry funds chosen for income protection insurance have about five million members. For income protection the indemnity value is used, which means the benefit would be determined by your income at the time of the claim. A 30-day waiting period applies. Source: Rice Warner, December 2008.

Total and permanent disability insurance pays a lump sum if you become permanently disabled because of an accident or an illness such as a stroke. You can be insured against either not being able to do your specific type of work or any work generally.

One advantage credit protection has over other insurance options is that premiums for normal life insurance and income protection vary depending on risk factors such as age, type of employment and health. With credit protection, you generally don't need a health assessment so it may therefore be more convenient and easy to take out. Be aware, however, that credit protection may not cover pre-existing conditions. Make sure you read the product disclosure statement and be clear about the cover it provides. ■

CHOICE verdict

There are about one million expensive and, in many cases, unsuitable credit protection policies. For most people, credit protection may not cover your needs and is usually more expensive than other insurance options.

There are much smarter options to make sure you're covered if something unexpected happens. It is essential to have an emergency fund; if you have children or other dependants, think about how much money would be needed in the event of your death to cover their education and other needs. Usually the cheapest way to do this is to take out life insurance through your super fund. Also consider income protection insurance, trauma and total and permanent disability insurance, which cover you in the event of an illness, accident or disability.

Cable guise

How much should you spend on cables to get the best sound and image quality for your home entertainment system? CHOICE finds out.

nutshell

- You don't need to buy an expensive HDMI or digital audio (Toslink) cable to get great video and sound.
- Most high definition (HD) content is below 1080p quality.

A gigantic flat panel TV has just arrived in your lounge room, waiting to be connected to a home theatre system that would make George Lucas salivate. Unfortunately, one of the experts providing "free" installation looks down aghast at your analog cables, and claims you need something that will give you uncompressed 1080p/12Hz HD video with 12-bit Deep Colour and eight channels of 192/24 digital audio for the ultimate 7.1 surround sound. Or, in plain English, a standard HDMI cable that should cost no more than $50.

Yes, this really did happen

Of course, the installer only has a $300 HDMI cable in his van, but insists it will be an investment in quality. Should you take him at his word before reaching for your wallet? Don't think this scenario is created merely to illustrate a point, it really happened to one of our CHOICE staff, who bought the expensive cable.

An HDMI cable of the same length and specification sells for anything from about $30 to more than $300, depending on the make and model, so CHOICE put a selection of HDMI and digital audio cables to the test to find out what, if any, differences could be found.

Expensive is not better

Our testing found no statistically significant variations in score either for picture or sound. Although the results were slightly in favour of the more expensive brand for longer lengths, the differences were not enough to conclude any brand delivers a significantly better result. Results for the digital audio cable were even more conclusive, with no advantage to be gained through the use of more expensive cables for better performance.

Beyond 1080p

High definition for TV sets refers to the number of lines on the screen – 720 and 1080 are generally considered HD. High-definition sources can be anything from 576p at the low end of TV broadcasting in Australia, up to 1080p with Blu-ray. The "p" stands for "progressive", which gives a more stable picture than an interlaced picture which usually has an "i" after the number.

HDMI version 1.3a allows for higher quality resolutions up to 2560 x 1600, which is WQXGA (see Jargon Buster, page 28). It also supports a colour depth of 16 bits per pixel, which is a higher resolution than 1080p. Our test is limited to 1080p (1920 x 1080) and the Blu-ray standard of 8 bits per pixel, since there is no commonly available source material or player beyond 1080p (8-bit) or any commercially available TV higher than 1080p. What this means is that the current HDMI standard supports technologies beyond even the latest Blu-ray equipment, and even if and when these higher quality resolutions become available, the effect for the average user of current HDMI cables will be minimal.

The digital story

High Definition Multimedia Interface – HDMI

A recent introduction to the home entertainment landscape, HDMI is a trademarked standard that combines audio and video in a digital format. Aside from vision and audio, an HDMI cable can also identify other connected devices, making it easier to integrate your home theatre system. Unlike analog cables such as SCART, component, composite and so on, HDMI cables can carry copy protection information as well.

The price variation for HDMI cable is astonishing, with short-run cables of up to three metres selling for anything from $30 to more than $300. In an effort to justify such exorbitant prices, performance claims on the packaging attempt to make the purchaser feel better about the investment. One company claims its product "eliminates digital-to-analog conversion between your video source and display for the most accurate high definition picture" – in other words, it does what it's designed to do.

Toslink – TOShiba LINK

A much older technology than HDMI, was introduced as a computer connection in the early 1980s. The optical cable allows for digital audio (both left and right channels or multi channel sound) to be transported between components using light as the carrier. In contrast to the more robust construction of an HDMI cable, a Toslink cable is more easily damaged. However, based on our test results, you should still be able to get a good quality, short-length Toslink cable for about $30, even though they are priced up to $200. >

Our results indicate the more expensive cables do not deliver any notably better results than the cheaper models.

CREATING A BETTER HOME THEATRE EXPERIENCE

- Look at reducing the ambient light in your room with blinds or choose a room where direct sunlight is least intrusive.
- Take the time to properly calibrate your home theatre system for the best quality sound.
- Don't spend your entire budget on the display and ignore your audio system; good sound is just as important as video.
- Don't expect those cheap DVDs you may have purchased overseas to provide fantastic quality video and audio. No matter how much you spend on cables, the maxim of "garbage in, garbage out" applies to all video and audio.
- If your TV does not support HDMI, check to see if you can use component video instead of composite or S-video. The results could still give you HD quality video, with up to 1080i resolutions achievable.
- Ensure your TV can deliver the highest quality resolution (1080p), as many TVs that state "HD" will only give you a 1080i picture.

HOW WE TEST

Four expert testers compare a range of HDMI and Toslink digital audio cables at various price points to determine the amount of difference in audio/video quality that can be detected. The panellists are unaware of the cable model, brand and cable lengths. Each cable is compared twice unless an obvious impairment makes further checking necessary. The second run follows a different randomised order.

Picture and sound quality The panellists score the picture quality and/or sound quality on a scale of 1-10, where 10 means no impairment can be seen and/or heard. They are asked to describe any impairment which causes a score of less than 10. Short sequences from a Blu-ray movie are shown for the HDMI test and from a CD for the optical cable test, including male vocal, female vocal, rock, classical and Celtic music styles.

Performance To extract a performance difference, our testers combine a number of cables using female/female joiners, however we do not recommend this setup as it could lead to some degradation in video quality. Various combinations of up to four of the supplied cables are tried, using three joiners. No effects on the picture were seen. The maximum length tried from the supplied cables was 26m. Finally, by adding two generic 5m cables to cables used in the test, making the cable length 33m, we could discern "sparkles" (small white pixels not in the original footage) on close inspection of a 1080p video source. When the video was reduced to 720p the errant pixels disappeared.

FURTHER TESTING

To confirm our results, CHOICE conducts more tests with a lay panel, which includes males and females across a broad age group.

Video To evaluate video quality, a copy of a Blu-ray movie sequence is shown using a Sony PS3 with the latest firmware applied and viewed on a Panasonic 50-inch plasma TV (TH-50PZ800A). Cables are swapped manually and the panel does not know which cable is in use at any given time.

Length For our long (10-metre) test we use a Jaycar Concord brand ($90) and a Monster brand cable ($600).

Toslink Reference tracks are played on a Pioneer DVD player that is connected to Denon AV receiver and Aaron stereo loudspeakers. Cables are swapped manually, and the panel does not know which cable is in use at any given time.

If you shop around, you should be able to find good HDMI cable options between $40 and $60 – spending $300 on a short cable is pointless.

DIGITAL CABLES Brand / model (in price order)	Cable length (metres)	Price ($)
HDMI CABLES		
Concord WQ-7402	3	48
Sony DLC-HD20P	2	72
Concord WQ-7405	10	90
Panasonic RP-CDHG30	3	99
Audioquest HDMI-A	3	109
Philips SWV3435/93	3	130
Monster MC500HD	2	199
Belkin PureAV AV52300	2.4	250
Monster MC1000HD	2	389
Monster 700HD	10	599
TOSLINK DIGITAL AUDIO CABLES		
Dick Smith Titanium series (C1766)	1.5	30
Neotech NOC1	3	37
Foxtel F310	1.5	40
Belkin PureAV	1.8	80
Audioquest CinemaQuest	2	99
Monster Monster Digital Interlink Lightspeed 100	2	179

USING THE TABLE

Price The price we paid in November, 2008.

CHOICE verdict

If you require a short HDMI cable of anything less than four metres, you should be able to find many good cable options between $40 and $60. Spending $300 on a short length of cable is pointless; the money could be put to better use on a better set of speakers or upgraded DVD or Blu-ray player. For longer cables over 10 metres, differences in performance may possibly be an issue if there is significant interference between the video source and display, but we did not find any difference until cables were combined to form lengths more than 33 metres.

Jargonbuster @*!?

Aspect ratio is the ratio of screen width to screen height. Your old television is most likely 4:3 (standard) while most flat panel LCD or Plasma TVs are 16:9 (widescreen).

Bits per pixel is a way to define the ability to resolve various degrees of colour resolution.

Component is the only analog cable solution to provide up to HD (1080i) quality if the TV can display the resolution. Three video cables are required to show the video, and you need a separate cable for sound.

Deep colour Colour depth measures the bits used to represent the colour of a single pixel. Greater colour depth gives a larger number of distinct colours from millions to billions of colours, allowing for smoother colour gradients. Deep colour is a new level of quality supported by the HDMI standard and is capable of rendering up to trillions of colours. However, currently there is no media available and only a few monitors supporting this level of detail.

DVD upscaling allows you to view your current DVD titles in an "enhanced video" mode, where the picture is interpolated to either 1080i or 1080p so your DVD movie appears almost HD. You'll need an HDMI connection and TV that can display HD to enjoy the benefits of DVD upscaling.

DVI (Digital Visual Interface) supports video only, with an identical signal to HDMI. It was introduced by the PC industry and can be found on many PC monitors, as well as some flat panel TVs. DVI provides complete support for HDMI video through the use of an HDMI/DVI converter.

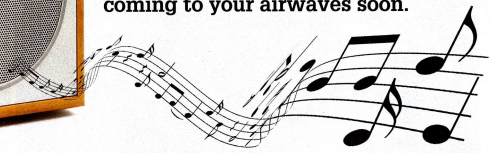
HDMI (High Definition Multimedia Interface) 1.3a HDMI 1.3a provides support for increased bandwidth capacity. This added bandwidth provides support for future HD display devices, such as higher resolutions, Deep Color and higher frame rates. This type of cable may show 'High Speed Rating' on the packaging, while cables that are not rated 1.3 may show 'Standard Speed'. However all previous versions of HDMI, including those rated as Standard Speed, will comfortably deal with your current video and audio demands, including support for full, uncompressed 1080p signals.

Toslink provides a digital audio connection and is a good option if you're unable to use HDMI to connect your Blu-ray player to your home theatre system. However, while Toslink supports most digital audio formats, it doesn't support audio formats such as Dolby TrueHD and DTS HD Master audio signals.

WQXGA (Wide Quad eXtended Graphics Array) is a resolution quality allowing pictures to be displayed at up to 2560 x 1600 pixels.

Radio by any other sound

What makes digital radio different? CHOICE investigates the new service coming to your airwaves soon.



nutshell

- What to expect when digital radio hits the market.

Digital radio is scheduled to begin broadcasting from about May 2009. Unlike digital TV there is no cut-off date for analog radio, therefore no need to rush out and buy a digital radio receiver. However, if you're keen to experience the difference digital technology makes to the radio waves you will need to open your wallet along with your eyes and ears.

What does digital radio do?

CHOICE anticipates quite a bit of promotion for digital radio across all media over the coming months. Using the slogan "Digital Radio Plus", the marketing will

no doubt extol features such as high-quality sound, station searching by name rather than frequency, the ability to pause and play back radio in much the same way as digital TV recorders and extra channels on specialist subjects. If your radio has a screen you'll also get text and pictures, and an electronic program guide to help you decide what to listen to in the future.

Initially, we expect the text that scrolls across the radio's screen will be simple, such as details of songs, weather or traffic updates, and of course advertising. Pictures will most likely be album covers or still images of presenters and their guests. However, we hold little hope for an electronic program guide that's up-to-date or accurate; digital TV still hasn't managed this and radio tends to be a much more fluid medium.

Who gets it?

If you live in Adelaide, Brisbane, Melbourne, Perth or Sydney there will be a large number of existing AM and FM radio stations broadcasting in both analog and digital modes. Outside the major capitals, however, you'll have to wait until the infrastructure is in place. There's no clear indication of how long this will take.

No new players will be allowed to enter the market for a period of six years from the launch, but existing licence holders are required to be broadcasting digitally in the mainland capitals by 1 July 2009 or else lose the right to do so.

How does it work?

Like digital TV, digital radio is broadcast as a stream of data that your digital radio receives and decodes. The advantage over analog is that you get more information in the same amount of radio spectrum, hence the ability to receive images and text as well as sound.

Analog radios cannot decipher the digital signal, but most digital radios also include an analog tuner. All stations transferring to the digital stream will simulcast a digital and analog signal for the foreseeable future.

How do you get it?

If you live within the broadcast areas you can purchase a digital radio receiver, which will most likely range in price from about $130 for a very basic model up to $550 for one with all the bells and whistles. Most radio stations are currently streaming their content over the internet at www.digitalradioplus.com.au.

CHOICE is testing some of the models due for release soon. We will look at ease of use, features and performance, and will be reporting our findings in the middle of the year. ■

Recyclable or not? Plastics 101

Only 15% of plastics we consume are recycled. Here's what you can do.

'Fully co-mingled' and 'source separated' recyclables are sorted at the materials recycling facility at Chullora, NSW, ready for reprocessing.

nutshell

- Although plastics recycling rates have more than doubled over the past decade, we are still recycling only a fraction of the plastics we use each year.
- Not all plastics with the "recyclable" symbol can be recycled in your local area.

Over the past decade ready access to kerbside recycling has more than doubled our plastics recycling rates, yet consumer confusion about exactly which plastics can be recycled in different council areas throughout Australia is hindering even greater progress. According to the latest figures from the Plastics and Chemicals Industries Association (PACIA) *2008 National Plastics Recycling Survey*, we still only managed to recycle 15% of all the plastics we consumed in 2007 (or 33% of all plastics packaging).

Recycling makes even more sense when you learn that manufacturing plastics from recycled content uses only 30% of the energy required for making plastics from fossil fuels which pollute, making the process both cheaper and more environmentally friendly.

A quick straw poll around the CHOICE office revealed an abundance of contradictory messages when it comes to what plastics can be recycled. So if you, too, think you should know more about recycling plastics, here is the information to help make best use of the schemes on offer in your area.

No standard recycling rules

While about 97% of Australian households have access to a council-run kerbside recycling scheme, there are no standardised recycling rules telling councils what to collect. Glass, paper, cardboard, metals, plastics and green waste can all be recycled, but what you can put out for kerbside collection depends entirely on where you live.

"It would be much more efficient if we had standard acceptance criteria across all councils," says Mike Ritchie, General Manager, Marketing and Communications at SITA Environmental Solutions. Until the commodity prices crash in September 2008, the market price for recycled plastics was very high, so councils and other businesses could offer free recycling services. But what local councils accept varies, depending on the transport cost, and/or proximity to, a materials recovery facility (MRF).

PUBLIC PLACE RECYCLING

Recyclables from bins in public places or at big events are processed separately from kerbside collections because their contamination rate is much higher. We still have far too few public place recycling schemes in Australia – again, it's a matter of cost for councils – but if there's one in place at your local picnic spot, help keep it viable by recycling just as meticulously as you do at home and only put the listed items in the dedicated recycling bins.

1.7 million tonnes of plastics were consumed in Australia in 2007, of which 15% (or 261,109 tonnes) was recycled.

Source: PACIA 2008 National Plastics Recycling Survey

Common recyclable plastics

You can identify most recyclable plastics by their Plastics Identification Code (PIC) number in the "recyclable" triangle, or chasing arrows (see the table, page 33, for details). This is a voluntary coding system that helps recyclers identify seven types of plastic (or polymer) when sorting manually.

Plastics with the numbers 1 (PET) and 2 (HDPE) are generally acceptable for recycling across Australia; they also constitute the vast majority of all plastics recycled. To find out which other recyclables are collected in your area, check with your council, or browse the www.RecyclingNearYou.com.au website, which has a wealth of recycling information you can search by product, postcode or suburb.

The remaining plastics are most commonly bundled together and sent as mixed plastics (PIC number 7) to overseas plants for reprocessing. Plastics with the numbers 3-6 are also separately reprocessed locally. While plastics sorted by type gain a better rate on the reprocessing market, the small size of the recycling market in Australia makes exporting as mixed plastics the more viable option.

Sorting through the confusion

Despite the visible PIC, there is no guarantee that the container can be recycled in your area, nor that it's indeed suitable for recycling. What can and cannot be recycled in kerbside collections in any particular area depends both on what the container was used for and the technology at the relevant MRF. The following are some unacceptable recyclables, even though they're made of recyclable plastic.

- ✗ **High-density polyethylene (HDPE)** container if it has carried a hazardous substance.
- ✗ **Plastic shopping bags, low density polyethylene (LDPE) packaging film**, small bits of **polystyrene packaging.** This lightweight packaging is likely to get blown out and contaminate the paper stream in the MRF (see At the Chullora MRF, right, for a description of the processes involved), unless the facility is fully automated and uses optical laser sorting technology.
- ✗ **Plastic bottle lids** They're generally made of different plastic from the container and may fall through the holes in the sorting cylinder (trommel), or create air pressure in a closed polyethylene terephthalate (PET) bottle when it's compressed, so that when the bottles pop open, the bales can fall apart. However, because they're a valuable source of recyclable plastic, some MRF operators now advise recycling plastic lids, as optical sorters can deal with the different plastics issue – so follow your council's advice. >

Inside a materials recycling facility

WSN Environmental Solutions (a NSW government-owned corporation) operates two materials recycling facilities (MRFs) in Sydney; we visited the Chullora MRF, pictured, one of the largest in Australia. It accepts both "fully co-mingled" and "source separated" recyclables, from kerbside collections where households either put everything into one bin, or presort paper from containers. Here, all recyclables get sorted into different streams – glass, plastics, paper and aluminium – ready for reprocessing.

As the delivery trucks tip their contents on the floor, large front-end loaders push it onto conveyor belts, where sorters remove by hand hazardous substances such as medical waste or car batteries, food waste and cardboard. We also saw them pick out lots of plastic bags, which should never be included in household recycling.

The second step in separation is more automated. The recyclables move through screens with different-sized holes, so small pieces (such as glass shards) fall through at a different point from cans and containers. A strong magnet separates ferrous metals from the rest of the recyclables; an "eddy current" works similarly for aluminium cans. An "air classifier" blows the lighter items (paper) away from the heavier ones (glass).

Predominantly mixed plastics now remain on the belt. The majority of the plastics received up to 80%, PET and HDPE, are then sorted out by hand; the rest are baled (compressed) into large blocks of mixed plastics, ready for transport to manufacturers for reprocessing.

Beyond the MRF

Reprocessing takes place either in Australia or overseas. According to the Plastics and Chemicals Industries Association (PACIA), 64% of all plastics recycled in 2007 were reprocessed in Australia. Of these, 61% was used for the manufacture of new products, 18% was exported (predominantly China) and 21% reused internally by the company that reprocessed it (for example, by a soft drink manufacturer in the production of PET bottles).

At the processing plant, the plastics are shredded, chopped or ground, washed, melted and pushed through an extruder, much like a spaghetti press. The mass is then cooled, pressed through a die and chopped or pelletised into granules, ready for manufacture into new products.

Check out our video at www.choice.com.au/recycling to get an idea of the process – and noise – that prevails on the floor.

THE FOUR 'R's

REDUCE the number of products you buy packaged in plastic. Where possible, choose refill or bulk packs and avoid products that are overly packaged.
REUSE plastic packaging you can't avoid, such as takeaway or ice-cream containers, to store food in the freezer.
RECYCLE all plastics your council accepts.
RECOVER where possible – buy products with recycled content.

There is no need to scrub every plastic food container before putting it out for recycling – a quick rinse is enough.

Plastics recycling dos and don'ts

✔ For kerbside recycling collection, only put out those your council accepts.

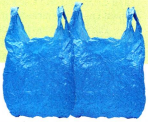
✔ Give containers a quick wipe or rinse; there's no need for thorough washing or removing labels.

✔ If a container has no Plastics Identification Code (PIC) number (1-7) but the contents are for human consumption (food, drink, detergent), it's likely to be recyclable.

✔ Keep different materials separate; don't stack yoghurt tubs into steel cans, for example.

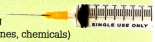
✔ Containers made of more than one type of plastic can be recycled in the mixed plastics stream.

✗ No plastic bags.



✗ No food waste.

✗ No hazardous substances (including clinical waste, medicines, chemicals) or hazardous waste containers (including syringes), even if they have a PIC number.



✗ No car parts, gas cylinders or motor oil paints.

✗ No ceramics, porcelain, mirrors, broken glass or light bulbs.

IMAGES: ISTOCKPHOTO

41 recycled plastic bottles represent enough energy savings to run a refrigerator for an hour. To run it for a month requires one tonne of plastics to be recycled.

626,787 tonnes of plastic packaging material were consumed in Australia in 2007, of which 33% (or 205,019 tonnes) was recycled. (PACIA)

< Contamination!

If you've ever thrown into the rubbish an empty peanut butter jar made of recyclable PET for fear of contaminating the whole load, simply because you didn't want to use all that hot water to clean it, think again. While food and drink waste put into the recycling, as well as containers with leftover food, will indeed contaminate the plastics recycling stream, as sorting these by hand requires more resources and drives up the prices for recycled plastics, they don't need much cleaning.

The higher the standard of the incoming recyclables, the more cost-effective the recycling. "Recycled plastic is a lower grade product than virgin plastic anyway, so increasing its price makes it economically unviable, it'll ruin the market for recycled plastic," says Planet Ark's Recycling Programs Manager Brad Gray.

However, there is no need to scrub every plastic food container with detergent and hot water before putting it out for recycling; a quick wipe or rinse is usually sufficient. The vast majority of plastics the Chullora MRF (see page 31) receives from household recycling schemes is clean enough to end up in the recycling stream.

Other items to keep out of your recycling bin include hazardous materials (such as medical sharps, clinical waste and household chemicals), which also require special disposal; drinking glasses, as they melt at a higher temperature than glass bottles and jars; and polystyrene meat trays, because of putrescible contaminants.

Recycling rates still too low

Australians recycled just 15% of all the plastics we consumed in 2007, which is 33% of all plastics packaging – the total plastics recycling rate includes durables as well as packaging. The packaging waste from household and public place recycling constitutes almost half of the total plastics recycled, but to put this into perspective, its lifespan is generally minute compared with durables such as pipes, which may last for years.

Jeff Angel, Executive Director of the Total Environment Centre, says the figures are also exaggerated because they don't include the plastic packaging on imported finished goods, and include the recovered packaging that's sent overseas for recycling or other purposes. "But even if 33% was correct, it's abysmally low," he says.

"The recycling rate in Australia has been improving over time, but there is still a lot of scope within the packaging and waste industries to improve these statistics. Greater public place recycling, better event recycling and deposit legislation would certainly help increase recycling rates," says Planet Ark's Brad Gray. ■

PLASTIC IDENTIFICATION CODES

NUMBER	TYPE OF PLASTIC (POLYMER)	COMMONLY USED FOR	COMMONLY RECYCLED INTO	TONNES CONSUMED IN 2007 (% USED IN PACKAGING)	RECYCLING RATE
1 PET	PET (polyethylene terephthalate)	Clear beverage, sauce and detergent bottles, plus hinged and two-piece containers for fresh produce	PET bottles, clothing, geo-textiles (such as fleecy jackets), furniture, carpet	139,508 (80%)	42%
2 HDPE	HDPE (high density polyethylene)	Milk, juice bottles, oil and vinegar bottles, ice cream tubs, shampoo and detergent bottles	Garbage, recycling and compost bins, pipes, crates, detergent bottles, outdoor furniture	321,907 (50%)	19%
3 V	V (vinyl) or PVC (polyvinyl chloride) (figures are for PVC only)	Plumbing pipe, garden hoses, blister packs	Pipe, floor coverings, shoes, bags	256,499 (3%)	5%
4 LDPE	LDPE (low density polyethylene)	Garbage and recycling bins	Film, bags, tubing, fence posts	377,948 (58%)	15%
5 PP	PP (polypropylene)	Microwave ovenware, hinged lunch boxes, containers for dairy products (cottage cheese, yoghurt, margarine)	Crates, boxes, plant pots, furniture, automotive parts	239,893 (32%)	16%
6 PS	PS (polystyrene) (clear, transparent)	Drinking glasses, yoghurt containers, hinged and two-piece containers for produce, bakery and deli	Bar stools, industrial spools, office accessories, glasses, coat hangers	37,409 (75%)	17%
6 PS	EPS (expanded polystyrene) (foamed)	Produce boxes, hot drink cups	Materials for the building industry, synthetic timber products	36,232 (26%)	6%
7 OTHER	Other (all other resins and multi-blend plastic materials)	Dependent on the material	Dependent on the material	300,690	9%

USING THE TABLE

Commonly used for If your council accepts this type of plastic in kerbside collections, these are the most common container types you can put out for recycling.

Commonly recycled into Many industries use recycled plastics in the manufacture of new products; these are the most common consumer goods that contain recycled plastics.

Consumed in 2007 This includes plastics packaging and durables. The percentage in brackets is for plastics packaging products, which generally have a much shorter life-span than durables (such as pipes).

Recycling rate This is the percentage of total plastics waste that is collected for recycling. Almost half is packaging discarded in household kerbside collections and public place recycling; the rest comes from the commercial, industrial and building sectors.

TABLE NOTES

The table is based on data from various sources, primarily from the 2008 National Plastics Recycling Survey, undertaken by Hyder Consulting for the Plastics and Chemicals Industries Association (PACIA) and based on data from 2007.

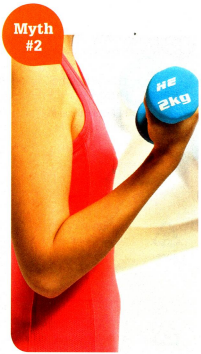
CHOICE verdict

To improve recycling efficiency, all three sectors in the community need to work together: governments to implement a more consistent approach to recycling, industry to invest in state-of-the-art materials recovery technology, and the community to reduce plastic consumption and then to recycle, recycle, recycle…

Greater public space recycling, better event recycling and deposit legislation would help increase recycling rates.

Exercise facts and fallacies

Whether you're in training for a marathon or keen to keep a New Year's resolution, knowing the facts will help you get more bang for your exercise buck.



nutshell

▶ Thanks to some commonly perpetuated myths, many people are miscalculating how much benefit they're getting from exercise, especially when it comes to weight loss.

We've all done it: gone for a walk first thing in the morning without eating breakfast beforehand because somewhere on the internet we read that more fat is burnt exercising on an empty stomach. Or, instead of jogging, you believe that so long as you walk the same distance, you'll burn as many kilojoules but just take longer.

Exercising regularly not only makes you feel good but can improve your health, according to the Department of Health and Ageing. Some benefits include:

- normal blood pressure
- healthy cholesterol levels
- lower levels of anxiety and depression
- stronger bones and better balance, which is particularly important for older people who may be at risk of osteoporosis
- weight management
- cardio-respiratory fitness, muscular strength and flexibility.

There are so many myths about exercise, endlessly perpetuated and validated through sheer repetition, that we decided to debunk eight of the most common and provide you with some facts instead.

'I just ate a 1250-kilojoule chocolate bar. Walking burns 1250kJ per hour, so if I walk for an hour I'll burn off the chocolate'

Most exercise and kilojoule tables state that a 68kg person walking for one hour at a moderate speed of 5km/h-6km/h burns between 1000 and 1250kJ. However, the tables don't usually explain that by hanging around, doing not much, you also burn some kilojoules – up to 600. In other words, they give "gross" kilojoule expenditure per unit of time, not "net" kilojoules (the amount above what you normally expend).

Assuming the chocolate bar is surplus to your daily energy needs, and you want to burn off an extra 1250kJ, you'll need to burn 1250 "net" kilojoules of exercise – equivalent to about an hour and a half of walking.

FACT Calculating energy expenditure based on gross, rather than net-kilojoule burn overestimates the contribution of exercise to total daily expenditure.

'Everyone tells me if there's no pain, there's no gain'

The "exercise as punishment" philosophy – that exercise must hurt to do you good – has just about disappeared from exercise lore, although for some people, puffing, sweating or messing up their hairdo constitutes pain.

Does huffing and puffing your way through a long jog really have any advantages over a brisk walk?

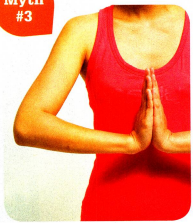
In terms of basic health, such as living a longer life free from disability caused by disease, regular moderate exercise will provide many benefits. However, vigorous exercise can provide extra protection against heart disease. It can also help with overall fitness and kilojoule burning.

FACT Exerting yourself a little will provide greater health and fitness benefits.

Vigorous exercise helps lead to greater protection against heart disease.

Walking is an efficient way of getting around, however, running the same distance will burn twice as many net kilojoules and take half the time.

Myth #3



'Low-intensity exercise is better for fat burning'

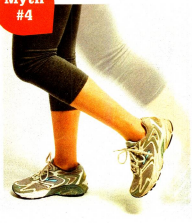
A common assumption is that if you exercise at low intensity, about 50%-60% of your maximum heart rate, you burn more fat than if you exercise at a higher heart rate, such as the 70%-85% capacity recommended for improving fitness. So if you're walking fast enough that you can talk but not sing, you're getting more out of it than the red-faced, sweaty joggers passing you by.

Yes, you burn more fat as a percentage of the total energy burned when exercising at low intensity – it accounts for almost all the fuel your body uses. But you burn more actual fat per minute, and a lot more total kilojoules, at higher intensities.

The advantage of low-intensity exercise, especially for people who aren't very fit, is that it's less tiring and puts less strain on the body, so you can exercise for longer. Ultimately it's the total kilojoules burnt that counts – so for maximum fat loss you must either get puffing and sweaty or just keep going longer.

FACT Low-intensity exercise is great for beginners, while exercising at higher intensities helps you get fitter and burn more total energy in a given amount of time.

Myth #4



'Walking one kilometre burns the same kilojoules as running one kilometre'

What's amazing about this myth is its longevity. For years scientists have known it's not true, but it's still touted as fact by any number of health and fitness industry professionals. It even features on lists of exercise myths – except the "myth" is that "running a mile burns more kilojoules than walking a mile".

Walking is an extremely efficient way for humans to move around, especially when you include your arms for added momentum. By contrast, running requires a lot more energy; you're effectively jumping from one foot to the other, raising and lowering your centre of gravity far more than walking.

Running consumes about twice as many net kilojoules (see Myth #1) per kilometre than walking, at least up to a certain walking speed. Walking faster than 8km/h burns more kilojoules than running at the same speed because walking at this speed is more inefficient and difficult.

FACT Running burns twice as many net kilojoules per kilometre as walking.

Myth #5

'Your metabolism increases after exercise, so you burn more kilojoules even though you've stopped exercising'

Bonus! Not only have you just burnt 1700kJ doing aerobics, but you'll keep burning kilojoules for hours afterwards. This is known as excess post-exercise oxygen consumption (EPOC), whereby increased metabolism means consuming more oxygen, which in turn burns kilojoules.

While not entirely bunkum, most people probably overestimate the degree of extra energy burned. And the small amounts involved could well be negated by moving less throughout the day and/or eating slightly more as reward for exercising.

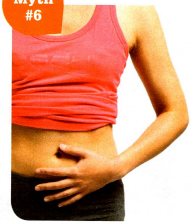
For any sort of meaningful EPOC effect, you'd have to exercise long and hard. Experts argue the level required would be intolerable for the average person, and only serious athletes would be capable of sustaining the required intensity for long enough. >

FACT Any increase in metabolic rate after exercising is likely to be fairly insignificant for the average person.

Exercise contributes to good overall health for people of all shapes, sizes and fitness levels.

CHOICE ONLINE
Go to www.choice.com.au/exercise for more exercise facts and myth busting.

Myth #6



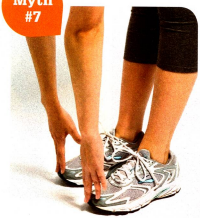
< 'You burn more fat if you exercise on an empty stomach'

This theory claims that if you don't eat before exercising, your body has to use fat as fuel, because there's hardly any sugar to burn – and if you want to lose weight, it stands to reason that burning fat is a good thing.

Evidence shows that more fat is burnt after longer fasting conditions than in the few hours after eating, when carbohydrate is the preferred fuel. But for most people, the total amount of energy burned is important, not whether it's fat or carbohydrate. Depending on how long you work out, you may find you get tired and don't exercise as hard as if you'd eaten, so you'll burn less total energy.

FACT Eating a little before exercise may help by giving you more energy for a better workout, and it's the total energy burnt that counts.

Myth #7



'You should stretch before exercising'

While it's important to warm up before exercise, especially if you are about to undertake strenuous exercise, there's little evidence that stretching – doing static stretches to pull at particular muscle and ligament groups, such as hamstrings, calf muscles, Achilles tendons and so on – does much good. On the other hand, warming up is doing the basic moves of whatever it is you're about to do (such as running, swimming or cycling) at low intensity.

Studies have found stretching doesn't appear to reduce the chances of injury and soreness, and there are contradictory findings on performance – some find it helps, some find it hinders, some find no effect.

FACT Stretching is useful to help maintain or increase flexibility, and can improve performance in the long term, so do it another time – perhaps while watching TV.

Myth #8

'I'm slim and healthy, so I don't need to exercise'

Even if you are slim and feel healthy, inactive people are not as healthy as they could be. Studies have found that people who are overweight but do regular exercise can be healthier than normal weight people who don't exercise.

The Department of Health and Ageing's *Physical Activity Guidelines for Adults* recommend a minimum of 30 minutes of moderately intense activity on most, but preferably all, days. Moderate means you're working hard enough to talk but not sing, and the 30 minutes can be accumulated through shorter sessions of 10-15 minutes.

FACT Exercise contributes to good overall physical and mental health for people of all body shapes, sizes and fitness levels. ■

CHOICE verdict

With more than half the Australian population overweight or obese, and health issues such as heart disease, diabetes and high blood pressure rapidly increasing, the importance of exercise is continually being stressed. However, there are many misconceptions perpetuated about the ability and extent to which we can burn fat and kilojoules through exercise. This in turn leads some people to eat more than they should relative to the amount of total daily activity they do, and therefore gain weight (or not lose as much as they'd like). If you're among the two-thirds of Australians not meeting the National Physical Activity Guidelines (see www.health.gov.au), doing so will be a great start to better health – just be aware of its limitations.

Medals of distinction

Some wine bottles are plastered in shiny stickers with tiny print, but what do they all mean? CHOICE guides you through the medal jungle.

nutshell

- A gold medal is better than a silver from any show, while a bronze indicates the wine is of sound quality, but not much more.
- Our wine show system has been criticised for being too commercial, but shows are addressing these concerns.

Over the past two decades our wine industry has grown so much that we're now one of the major exporters of quality wines. Grown, too, has the number of wine bottles bearing shiny medal stickers. But are all these medals a genuine indicator of a good quality wine or just a marketing ploy? As is so often the case, the answer is not a simple yes or no. There are, however, some awards worth looking for and some issues to be aware of when choosing a wine you don't know.

Shows aplenty

There's certainly no shortage of wine shows, with 62 in Australia alone plus, of course, many more overseas. As well as national wine shows, there's at least one major wine show in each state (see page 38) and many more shows for local wines in our key wine-growing regions. Other shows are open to specific varieties only, such as the Great Australian Shiraz Challenge, or to wines from grapes grown in a particular region only, such as the inland or cool climate wine shows. It seems for every group of people who produce a certain type of wine, there's an appropriate wine show to showcase their product, whether it's made from an alternative variety or organically grown grape, by a small or boutique winemaker or an amateur.

For a complete overview of and links to all the relevant wine shows, check out the website of the Australian wine industry portal at www.winebiz.com.au.

Who's to benefit?

The major state wine shows, run by each state's Royal Agricultural Society, have traditionally been aimed at winemakers to help them benchmark their product, promote it and improve on style. The wines – usually of the current vintage, the previous year's wines and mature ones – were judged by their peers, and the results gave winemakers an idea of how the current harvest was going and how the previous and older wines were developing.

More recently, however, this established wine show system has come under fire from many corners. One of the major criticisms is that it's grown into a big, commercial enterprise, where major wine producers who enter large amounts of wine dominate, and the more individualistic wines from small, cutting-edge wineries are judged unfairly.

More than 4600 wines can be accommodated at the Royal Melbourne Wine Show, so the number of wines a judge has to assess in any one day can be dauntingly large. In these circumstances, if the judging panel gets tired, critics say that the bigger, oaky, full-bodied styles – the commercial show ponies, as some would say – tend to do better than the more elegant styles.

Many of the shows have taken these criticisms on board, however, and are implementing changes that should not only improve the show system for the winemaker but also make it more relevant for consumers. Some of the >

< changes include keeping the numbers down in any one class for judging, dividing the classes into smaller, more specific ones so the results make more sense for the consumer, and broadening the field of judges to include more consumer-oriented experts such as wine writers, sommeliers and retailers.

Gold, silver, bronze and trophies

At the Olympics it's easy to keep track of the achievements: gold for the winner, silver for the runner-up and bronze for the third place-getter. With the wine show system it's unfortunately not as simple as choosing the best, second and third in each class.

The number of wines that win medals is generally not set, although there are some exceptions. So in theory, if there were, say, 20 unwooded chardonnays in a certain class, they could all receive a gold medal, if they were of the appropriate standard. That's rarely the case, though. In reality it's more likely that about 30%-40% of all show entrants receive a bronze medal, and a much smaller number get a silver or gold.

While the entry conditions and judging protocols vary from show to show, the wines are usually divided into appropriate classes, which are either defined by grape variety and vintage, or by general descriptors such as mature dry reds, aromatic whites and so on.

The judges blind-taste all wines, awarding points (out of 20) for each wine's appearance (maximum 3), aroma (7) and palate/flavour (10), the same way we conduct our wine tastings at CHOICE.

Only the best wines in a class, the gold medal winners, are considered for a trophy. These are the stand-out wines in the show. The prestigious Jimmy Watson and Stodart trophies (from the Royal Melbourne and Royal Queensland shows, respectively) are perhaps less relevant for consumers than for winemakers, as they're awarded to one-year-old reds, which are still undergoing maturation and may have changed their characteristics by the time they're bottled for sale.

No medal?

For wines that sell for less than $25, a wine medal is an effective marketing tool that helps draw people's attention to the wine on the bottleshop shelf. Winning an award doesn't usually increase a wine's price, but it'll certainly increase sales. People like medals, retailers tell us, and ask for them if a wine is advertised as a medal winner but doesn't show the award on the bottle.

In such a case, check with the retailer. You may be looking at stock from the same vintage that was bottled before the wine won the award. If in doubt, check with the show. It should have all award winners listed on its website.

Don't be concerned if the wine you like boasts no medals. Not all winemakers agree with the wine show system and prefer the customer to judge their wines, at the cellar door, for example, or they simply mightn't have had a sample ready at the time of entry into a show.

Australian capital city wine shows

The following shows are the major national wine shows run by each state's Royal Agricultural Society.

www.rncas.org.au The Royal National Capital Agricultural Society stages the **National Wine Show of Australia**. For last year's show, entry conditions had been tightened, resulting in 1400 wines entered for judging and the highest proportion of medals, including 165 gold medals, awarded.

www.perthroyalshow.com.au The **Perth Royal Wine Show**, run by the Royal Agricultural Society of WA, was established more than 40 years ago and is credited with putting WA on the map as a producer of quality wines. Last year's show judged 2400 entries from almost 400 wineries.

www.adelaideshowground.com.au The 2008 **Royal Adelaide Wine Show** received 2598 entries from 372 wineries. One of the features of this show is the "Advertiser/Royal Adelaide Wine Show Dozen", a selection of medal-winning wines that are sold with tasting notes and a catalogue of results.

www.hobartshowground.com.au First held in 1975, the **Royal Hobart International Wine Show** has grown to become the second-largest wine show in the country. It restricts entries to wines already bottled (no barrel samples can be entered) to ensure the wines judged are the same as those sold to consumers.

www.wineshow.com.au The **Royal Melbourne Wine Show** is one of Australia's largest and most prestigious wine shows. Since it was first conducted by the Royal Agricultural Society of Victoria in 1884, when it featured 13 entries, it has grown to more than 4600 entries.

www.ekka.com.au/wineshow The **Royal Queensland Wine Show** was first held in 1876 and has since grown to accommodate more than 3000 entries. Held in early July, it is the first of the annual national wine shows of Australia, providing the first taste of the new season's vintage.

www.sydneyroyalshows.com.au Wine competitions are one of the oldest competitions of the NSW agricultural show. The first mention of "the best sample of Australian wine" was recorded in 1826. The 2009 **Sydney Royal Wine Show** judged 2355 entries (2008 vintage) from 357 exhibitors. ■

WHAT TO LOOK FOR

DECODING THE MEDAL SYSTEM

- Looking for a really good drop? Go for a **trophy winner,** they're reserved for the best gold medal wines in the show.
- A **gold medal from a major state capital city show** (see opposite) is a good indicator that the wine is of high quality and has been compared with many others in its class.
- Don't ignore **gold medals from regional or other reputable wine shows,** especially if you're after a particular style. For example, a gold medal from the Hunter Valley Wine Show is probably more relevant and valuable for a Hunter Valley semillon than one from a large state show, just as a medal from an alternative varieties show is more relevant for a tempranillo or sangiovese, simply because they've been judged with similar wines.
- **Silver medals** are easier to achieve than gold, but a **bronze medal** simply indicates the wine is of sound quality, perhaps slightly above average.
- **Never heard of it?** Ask your wine retailer about a wine you don't know, or research it on the net and read reviews. The wine label and back of the bottle is also a good source of information. Here the winemaker will tell you if it's a consistent wine show medal winner, even if this particular vintage hasn't (yet) won a medal.

D'Arenberg The Laughing Magpie 2006 Shiraz Viognier
Multiple medals are a good indication that a large number of judges have thought this wine to be worth a medal. This $28 Shiraz Viognier boasts one trophy plus three gold medals, including one from a large international show.

Taylors Eighty Acres 2005 Shiraz Viognier
The prestigious San Francisco International Wine Competition judges thousands of wines and awards a Double Gold Medal when all judges on a particular panel agree that the wine deserves a Gold Medal.

Warburn Estate Gossips Shiraz
Don't be fooled – not all gold stickers are wine show medals; this one just lists the vintage. Others we saw promoted a producer's 25 years of winemaking, or that it was imported.

Pirramimma 2004 McLaren Vale Shiraz
An award-winning wine from the Sydney International Wine Competition has been judged alongside appropriate food – a unique feature among major international shows. This show concentrates on the top 20% of wines in the show and has its awards capped at about 15%. The top 5% of entries receive the "Top 100" award.

Wyndham Estate Bin 555 2005 Shiraz
Not all award-winning wines are in the premium price bracket. This shiraz cost us less than $10 and boasts seven medals: three gold from Australian wine shows, including one trophy for the best shiraz over one year old, and four silver medals, including one from a prestigious international show.

Small stuff, but nanofood is a big deal

No longer in the realm of science fiction, nanofoods are on their way to a supermarket near you – without being labelled and with major safety concerns.

nutshell

- Nanotechnology involves structures as small as molecules, with new and unexpected properties that could make them hazardous to health.
- Nanofoods may already be on supermarket shelves without us knowing – and without violating current Australian food regulations.
- CHOICE wants nanofoods better regulated to ensure they are both safe and properly labelled.

If you believe its proponents, nanotechnology will underpin the next industrial revolution. Recent figures suggest nanotechnology could be worth up to $50 billion a year to the Australian economy, so not surprisingly government and industry are currently investing about $100 million annually in nanotechnology research and development. Nanotechnology has already been in use for a number of years in the electronics and IT industries, and is increasingly being used to create everyday consumer products, such as suncreens (see Consumer News, page 7), and including food. But with more questions than answers about its safety, will exposure to nanotechnology put our health at risk? CHOICE investigates.

What is nanotechnology?

Broadly speaking, nanotechnology involves manipulating matter at the nanoscale to create new materials, structures and devices. The nanoscale is usually taken to mean structures ranging in size from one to 100 nanometres, about the size of individual molecules. One nanometre (nm) is a billionth of a metre and to put this in perspective, a human hair is about 80,000nm-100,000nm thick, while a single molecule of the protein haemoglobin (which carries the oxygen in our blood) is about 4nm across. At this tiny scale, materials can have different properties from their bulk form because of the larger relative surface area (making them potentially more reactive) and new quantum effects that can take over from the usual laws of physics.

"Nanofoods" refers to all foods to which manufactured nanoscale food components have been added and/or packaged in materials to which manufactured nanoparticles have been added.

DO WE REALLY WANT NANOFOOD?

A recent poll of more than 1000 people commissioned by Friends of the Earth found nine out of 10 Australians want safety checks on nanofood additives. Ninety-six percent of respondents agreed that food companies should conduct safety testing on food and food packaging ingredients that contain nanoparticles; 92% thought food companies should label food and packaging that contain nanoparticles; and 40% said they would not purchase foods containing nanoparticles at all.

Last year a phone survey of more than 1000 people, carried out on behalf of the Australian Office of Nanotechnology, found that although many respondents were hopeful, even excited, about potential uses of nanotechnology, particularly in the area of medicine, the area of food was an exception – nearly 80% of respondents were either concerned or very concerned that food labelling should provide information about nanotechnology. Public opinion surveys in some European countries have also found that consumers are not in favour of the use of nanomaterials in food or packaging. Consumers also believe nanomaterials should be independently assessed for safety before they are placed on the market.

Where is nanotechnology already being used?

In November 2008, the Woodrow Wilson International Centre for Scholars in Washington listed more than 800 entries in its inventory of nanotechnology consumer products. Consumer products range from invisible sunscreens (where nanoscale titanium dioxide and zinc oxide give transparent UV protection – see Consumer News, page 7) to shirts that don't stain (where researchers have copied the nanostructure of lotus leaves to create water-repellant surfaces).

In medicine, progress is being made in areas such as disease diagnosis and drug delivery targeted at specific sites in the body (making cancer treatment, for example, potentially more effective), and in other non-domestic situations, nanotechnology is being applied in the fields of environmental protection for water and air purification, pollution detection and harnessing solar energy.

What is the food industry doing?

Some of the food giants, including Kraft, Nestlé and Unilever, are exploring the use of nanotechnology, but so far keeping very quiet about what is in the pipeline. There are, however, plenty of potential food applications of nanotechnology being openly canvassed.

- **Food additives** Ingredients are processed to form nanostructures or nanotextures to enhance taste, texture and consistency of food. One example of this might be the development of ice-cream with a lower fat content that retains a fatty texture and flavour.
- **Food processing equipment** Knives and chopping boards can be coated with antibacterial silver nanoparticles. These products are already on the market, despite evidence suggesting that nanosilver may be toxic and is already of definite environmental concern. When products treated with nanosilver are washed, nanoparticles are released into waste water treatment facilities and can destroy beneficial bacteria.
- **Food quality** Nanosensors (integrated with packaging) may increase the shelf life of food by detecting spoilage bacteria or the loss of food nutrients, possibly releasing antimicrobials, flavours, colours or nutritional supplements in response.
- **Food packaging** Nanomaterials are already added to packaging to keep food fresher for longer; for example, blocking UV light using nanozinc oxide and antibacterial films that contain silver nanoparticles.

What's in it for consumers?

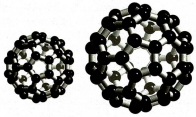
Nanotechnology certainly offers exciting possibilities for the future, such as safer food that can be conveniently stored for longer periods without deterioration. Other possibilities include foods fortified with healthy ingredients such as vitamins, antioxidants or omega-3 fats, encapsulated so that they are delivered exactly where they are needed in your body.

What are the risks?

There's nothing inherently unsafe about very small particles – we are exposed to them every day. The air we breathe, food we eat and water we drink all naturally contain particles within the nanometre range. Most health concerns relate to the potential impacts of deliberately manufactured nanoparticles that are different from anything that occurs in nature (see Nanotubes: The New Asbestos?, page 42).

The study of the toxicity of nanomaterials, "nanotoxicology", is in its infancy, so rigorous safety information is limited. However, experts agree there is an urgent need for research in this area:

- We don't know how nanoparticles in food are absorbed, transported around the body, accumulated or eliminated. Some nanoparticles may be able to transfer food components to parts of the body not normally exposed to them.
- Worse, we don't know how to routinely test for the presence of nanomaterials in food, which is concerning since in order to assess the risk posed by any chemical we must first be able to identify and measure it.



▶ The possible health and environmental effects of carbon 'bucky' balls and other nano structures are largely unknown.

CHOICE ONLINE
Visit our blog at www.choice.com.au/nanofood to tell us what you think about nanotechnology in the food you eat.

What are our food regulators doing?

The national regulator, Food Standards Australia New Zealand (FSANZ), seems less concerned than its equivalents in the US and UK. FSANZ has strengthened the Application Guidelines for nanofoods, but the Food Standards Code itself remains unchanged, and CHOICE does not believe the changes made so far adequately protect consumers. Furthermore, there is no requirement for manufactured nanoparticles to be specifically labelled. FSANZ is thus failing to provide adequate information for consumers to make an informed choice – supposedly one of its primary aims (see Nanofood: What CHOICE Wants, page 42).

Under wraps

With no specific regulation so far, and in the absence of laws requiring manufacturers to identify nanofoods on the label, there could well be nanofoods already on the supermarket shelves that we don't know about. Some nanotechnology analysts estimate that between 150-600 nanofoods and 400-500 nanofood packaging applications are already on the market internationally.

In Australia, confectionery packaging, bottle coatings and PET drink bottles containing nanoparticles could already be on the market, because there is no regulatory process or safety assessment. >

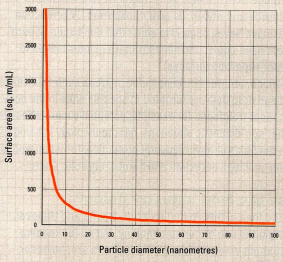
Small particles, big risks

The very properties that make nanomaterials so attractive – their small size (that of atoms and molecules) and relatively larger surface area – can also make them potentially toxic to humans.

- They have far greater access to our body (bioavailability) than larger particles, resulting in greater uptake into individual cells, tissues and organs. This greater access and reactivity may introduce new toxicity risks. Numerous test tube studies (in vitro) have shown that nanomaterials can cause damage to cells and tissues in a number of ways, including changing the DNA and causing mitochondrial damage.
- There's some evidence to suggest nanoparticles may be associated with rising levels of immune system dysfunction and inflammations of the gastrointestinal tract (GIT), including the suggestion that exposure may be associated with Crohn's disease, a damaging and chronic inflammation of the GIT which can lead to cancer.
- There has been some research which shows that nanoparticles can cross the blood/brain barrier. A leading European toxicologist has said we cannot rule out a link between nanoparticles and diseases such as Alzheimer's, Huntington's and Parkinson's.
- Nanomaterials now in commercial use by the food industry, such as nanoscale titanium dioxide (used as an ultraviolet protector and an antimicrobial in food packaging and containers) and silver (used as an antimicrobial in food packaging, chopping boards and knives), have been shown to be toxic to cells and tissues in both test tube and animal studies.

Another area of concern is the potential for nanonutritional additives (functional foods) to provide an excessive dose of some vitamins and nutrients, or to interfere with the absorption of other nutrients. Dr Qasim Chaudhry, leader of the nanotechnology research team at the UK's Central Science Laboratory, warns that nanoparticles and nanoencapsulated food ingredients "may have unanticipated effects, far greater absorption than intended or altered uptake of other nutrients, but little, if anything, is known currently".

Nanoparticles have a much larger surface area than the same amount of material in bulk form.



NANOTUBES – THE NEW ASBESTOS?

A recent study in mice found that some forms of carbon nanotubes may be as harmful as asbestos if inhaled in sufficient quantities. However, there are still some unanswered questions. It is still not clear whether carbon nanotubes will become airborne and be inhaled, or whether they can successfully work their way to the sensitive outer lining of the lungs. A pivotal report on nanotechnology by the Royal Society in the UK in 2004 recommended that, until there was evidence to the contrary, factories and research laboratories should treat manufactured nanoparticles and nanotubes as if they were hazardous.

Based on the results of this study, the toxicity and potential implications of long, multi-walled carbon nanotubes is an issue of priority for the Office of the Australian Safety and Compensation Council (ASCC). The ASCC has also initiated a nanotechnology occupational health and safety research program, while the NSW Department of State and Regional Development's recent inquiry into nanotechnology recommended that a national mandatory labelling scheme be put in place for all engineered nanomaterials used in the workplace.

< Nanofood: What CHOICE wants

The main issue around regulation is not the small size of nanoparticles as such, rather their novel properties. We've always been exposed to naturally occurring nanoparticles, but never before to nanoparticles specifically manufactured to influence food properties. We simply do not yet know enough about how they could affect human health; no one predicted, for example, that carbon nanotubes could cause cancer (see Nanotubes – The New Asbestos?, left).

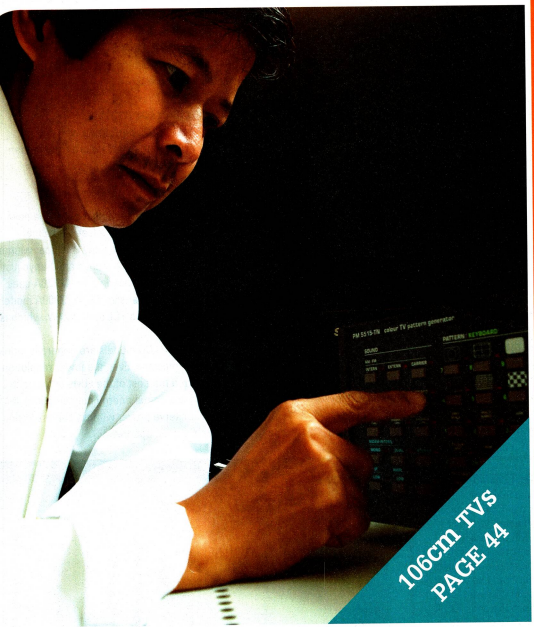
Regulation definitely warrants a precautionary approach; lack of evidence of harm isn't evidence of safety. CHOICE would therefore like to see all nanofoods considered as "novel" and as such trigger rigorous case-by-case safety assessments, as required for all novel foods under the Food Standards Code. Specifically, we would like to see the following safeguards.

- A definition of "nano" incorporated into the Food Standards Code.
- Safety assessments carried out by FSANZ to specifically address the new potential risks posed by nanomaterials.
- All food containing manufactured nanoparticles be specifically labelled.
- All manufactured nanoparticles be treated as new chemicals and subject to rigorous new safety testing – even those previously used in bulk form. For example, chocolate with nanotitanium dioxide (added to improve its appearance) should not be allowed on the market without undergoing any safety assessment simply because titanium dioxide in its bulk form is a permitted additive.

Without these changes, there's a very real possibility that nanofoods will appear legitimately on the shelves without having undergone any safety testing – with the potential for serious consequences. ■

On test

Home entertainment, whitegoods, household and personal appliances – they're all tested here.



Inside

47 Washing machines

52 Automatic espresso machines

55 Twin tuner DVRs

Plus

58 Electric toothbrushes

60 Handheld blenders

For more product tests go to www.choice.com.au

CHOICE has its own testing laboratories, where experienced technical staff put products through their paces. We use test methods from Australian standards, as well as developing our own in order to match the way consumers use a product in reality. We buy the products we test, to maintain our independence from manufacturers and so that we know what you're faced with in the shops. Our recommendations are based on a product's quality and performance, with no hidden bias.

BEST BUY

CHOICE Best Buy CHOICE calls a product a Best Buy if it delivers high quality at a comparatively low price. Not every test report has Best Buys.

GREEN BUY

CHOICE Green Buy CHOICE calls a product a Green Buy if it delivers both good quality and environmental performance at a comparatively low price. Not every test report has Green Buys.

CHOICE Video When you see the CHOICE Video icon, you can find more information about that story at choice.com.au.

Flat screen, flat sound

Like a silent movie star, most TVs in this test are better when they don't talk.

nutshell

▶ Connecting one of these TVs to a separate sound system will compensate for their poor sound quality.
▶ More pixels don't guarantee a better picture.

Perhaps surprisingly, most of the 106cm TVs CHOICE tested sound worse than cheap car speakers. They're often harsh, tinny and distort badly as the volume is increased. The Samsung LA40A550P1F and Sony models sound OK, but for best results we recommend connecting your TV to a separate sound system.

Pixels are just dots

Paying for lots of pixels on the screen – a higher resolution model – doesn't guarantee a sharper, more pleasant or more accurate image. The advantage of a higher resolution screen is that you can sit closer and still get lots of detail in the image. But images aren't so simple and most of us don't sit close enough to really experience the benefit.

Both the Panasonic TH-42PX8A and Samsung PS42A410C1D have 1024 x 768 pixel screens, which is a much lower resolution than the others in this test. From two metres away the pixels are only just visible with a still image on the screen. A moving image makes it very difficult to see them at all.

The Sanyo, TCL and both Samsungs have quite a lot of "dither" in some circumstances. This effect is something akin looking at a suspension of very fine particles moving in a liquid. The problem is not with the number of pixels on the screen; it's a result of the TV's processor, which controls each pixel's colour and intensity, failing to deal with subtle and very rapid changes. This is sometimes confused with a lack of resolution, because the moving dots are assumed to be pixels.

Digital tuner performance

All the tuners except the TCL performed well in our testing. The TCL is OK, but may have more trouble than the others if your aerial or wiring isn't up to scratch.

Powering up

All models except the TCL manage to get under the new one watt standby energy requirement (see Consumer News, *CHOICE*, February 2009). The Sony is a clear winner at less than 0.2W, while the LG, Samsungs and Sanyo just get there at about 0.7W. The Panasonic TH-42PZ8A uses about 0.6W, but the more expensive TH-42PZ800A model and Sharp both use 0.32W. The TCL uses 1.21W, which is more than necessary.

When they're on, the LCD models are generally more energy efficient than plasmas. Even the lower resolution plasmas cannot match the best of the LCDs in this test (the table below shows actual energy consumption). If you're looking to conserve power without compromising quality, the Sony is a good option. >

HOW TO COMPARE TVS IN THE STORE

- **Viewing angles** have improved in newer models, but some still have a dimmer picture when viewed from different angles, which is important if several people will be watching the TV at once. Stand square to the screen then walk sideways until you notice the image quality drop. If you normally sit lower than the screen, make sure you try looking up at it as well.
- Watch a **variety of programs** in the shop. Look for natural skin tones and texture on a person in a studio setting, such as a news presenter.
- Check the picture for a **colour cast**, such as a pinkish or greenish tinge that can't be fixed by adjusting the controls.
- Measure how far you normally **sit from your TV**. Make sure you're this distance from the TV you're considering purchasing. Look for areas of plain colour to see if you can spot pixels or dither patterns.

PRODUCT	PERFORMANCE						FEATURES	
Brand / model (in rank order)	Overall score (%)	Picture quality score (%)	Sound quality score (%)	Ease of use score (%)	Energy score (%)	Digital tuner score (%)	Panel type	Front/rear HDMI inputs
Sony KDL-40V4000	70	78	55	66	67	80	LCD	1/2
Samsung PS42A410C1D	65	74	45	63	53	95	Plasma	0/2
LG 42LG70YD	62	56	50	66	76	73	LCD	1/2
Samsung LA40A550P1F	62	49	60	62	71	94	LCD	1/2
Panasonic TH-42PX8A	61	65	30	64	69	88	Plasma	0/2
Panasonic TH-42PZ800A	58	61	35	67	54	86	Plasma	1/2
TCL L42E9ADF	57	61	35	55	77	60	LCD	0/3
Sanyo LCD-42XR8DA	54	46	45	51	69	80	LCD	0/3

What to buy

70% SONY KDL-40V4000

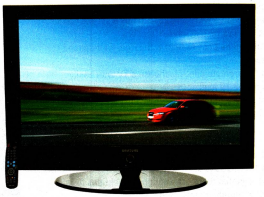
PRICE $2399

GOOD POINTS

- Good remote control.
- It has good, detailed blacks when viewing Blu-ray Disc (BD) movies.
- Picture-in-picture capability (one TV channel and one external input).
- Remote control can be used to operate some other video devices.

BAD POINTS

- Some assembly required (stand).
- Poor on-board controls – they're on top of the TV and would be difficult to access if wall-mounted.
- Overall image is less bright than the other TVs in this test – would not be a good choice for frequent viewing in a brightly lit room.
- Doesn't have a channel skip or equivalent feature (but does have Favourites).



65% SAMSUNG PS42A410C1D

PRICE $1649

GOOD POINTS

- Two-year warranty.
- Good on-screen user interface.

BAD POINTS

- Obvious dithering in background when viewing Blu-ray.
- Poor sound quality from its own speakers – voices sound tinny and overall sound is harsh, unnatural and lacks bass.

Most of the 106cm TVs we tested sound harsh and tinny – worse than cheap car speakers.

About the rest

- The LG is best when viewing normal DVDs, but Blu-ray images appear washed out on this model. It comes with a three-year warranty and is reasonably easy to use, so could be a good buy at the right price.
- The Samsung LA40A550P1F also has a three-year warranty. Like the LG, its Blu-ray images appear a little washed out, but its sound is OK.
- The Panasonic TH-42PX8A has a slightly better picture score than the much more expensive TH-42PZ800A. This is mainly because the picture on the TH-42PZ800A has a very noticeable green tinge. The TH-42PX8A also has a slight green tinge, but our viewing panel didn't think this would intrude under normal circumstances. Both have muffled sound with distorted bass.
- The TCL has a three-year warranty. Its picture tends to be washed out regardless of the source, but is better with Blu-ray. It has a relatively narrow angle of view and you would need to be right in front to get the best from it. Its sound is tinny overall and tends to distort at higher volumes.
- The Sanyo is the cheapest of the 1920 x 1080 TVs in our test, isn't easy to use and tends to have unnaturally chalky skin tones, which are worse when playing Blu-ray. Voices sound muffled, and the overall sound is harsh and lacking in bass.

CIFICATIONS

In use (W)	Claimed resolution (pixels)	Dimensions (cm, H x W x D)*	Contact	Price ($)
	1920 x 1080	68.5 x 98 x 28	sony.com.au	2399
	1024 x 768	76.5 x 105.5 x 32	samsung.com.au	1649
	1920 x 1080	73.5 x 102.5 x 29.5	lge.com.au	2499
	1920 x 1080	67.5 x 105.5 x 24	samsung.com.au	2529
	1024 x 768	73 x 101.5 x 32.5	panasonic.com.au	1699
	1920 x 1080	72 x 106 x 32.5	panasonic.com.au	2899
	1920 x 1080	72 x 101.5 x 29	tclelectronics.com.au	2299
	1920 x 1080	84.5 x 107 x 34.5	sanyo.com.au	1499

USING THE TABLE

Scores The overall score is made up of:

- Picture quality: 35%
- Sound quality: 20%
- Ease of use: 20%
- Energy score: 15%
- Digital tuner score: 10%

Price Recommended retail, as of October 2008.

TABLE NOTES

** Rounded up to the next half centimetre, with the base attached and all protruding parts included. Power cord and connecting cables excluded.*

(A) Service use – only for upgrades and repairs.

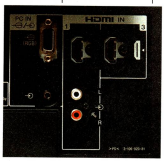
What to look for

ESSENTIAL FEATURES

- A **built-in digital tuner** ensures you don't have to buy a set-top box to receive digital TV. All the TVs on test have HD tuners.
- The **remote control** should be easy to read with large, well-spaced buttons and clear labels.
- If you're likely to lose the remote control, choose a TV with easily accessible **controls on the TV** itself.
- All models in this test are **wall-mountable**. However, none comes with wall mounts, so you have to buy a separate kit.

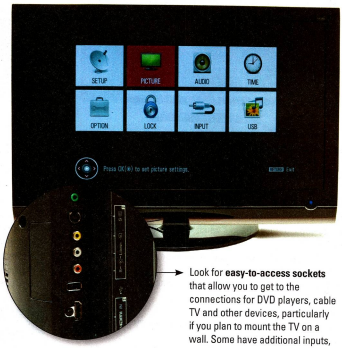
CONNECTIONS

- Check that the **input connections** on the TV match the output on the devices you want to hook up to it, such as a DVD player/recorder, cable TV or games console, and that there are enough connections for all the devices you want to attach at the same time.
- **Audio outputs** are usually at the back of the TV. In this test all have at least one analog and one digital audio output. The Sony has two.



HDMI (High-Definition Multimedia Interface) is a digital connection for sound and video in one cable. Even if you don't have any gadgets with HDMI output now, expect more devices to use them in future, so it might be worth having at least one HDMI socket on your TV. If you want to use your TV as a computer display, you'll need a DVI input for newer computers or a VGA input for older ones. Or you could use HDMI if your computer has an HDMI output.

On-screen menus should be easy to read and understand without having to resort to the manual.



Look for **easy-to-access sockets** that allow you to get to the connections for DVD players, cable TV and other devices, particularly if you plan to mount the TV on a wall. Some have additional inputs, usually on one side.

HOW WE TEST

Picture quality Our testers set up all eight models close together and adjust their controls to get the best picture quality possible. They keep the lighting in the room low and the sound muted, and three experts watch a variety of footage (from Blu-ray and DVD movies as well as a computer game) simultaneously on all the screens. They evaluate the picture quality and rate it out of 10 using the following criteria.

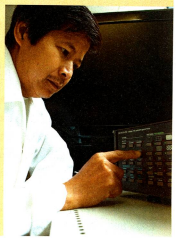
- They check how well each TV produces **accurate colour**.
- They display a number of **test patterns** from a high-quality DVD player to measure if any of the picture is cut off at the edges and check for distortions, such as circles that aren't round or wavy lines that should be straight.
- They play **movies** and other footage to check the screen's ability to produce images without colour-banding, jerkiness, blurring, vibration and colours bleeding in high contrast or very intensely saturated parts of the image. They also check that there are no trails behind fast-moving objects on the screen.

Sound quality They listen to movies and music to check for rattles, hums, hisses or distortion, as well as judging how well the high and low sounds are produced.

Ease of use They use the remote control, front panel controls and onscreen display to perform a number of common tasks. They look for logical menus and clear labelling, buttons and controls that are easily identified and can be used without interfering with other controls. Whether the TV has an inbuilt digital tuner is also included in the ease of use score – they all do in this test.

HD digital tuner They check each tuner for reception performance in areas with a good quality signal, plus areas where reception is less than ideal and where it might be affected by things such as a dryer or vacuum cleaner operating in the house.

Energy score Our testers use a power meter to measure the power consumed by the TV when in use and on standby. The latter is not scored.



On a pedestal

Front-loading machines are gentler on clothes than top loaders, but may not be so gentle on your back. However, CHOICE has discovered a solution to this problem.

nutshell

- The Amazon Washer/Dryer Stand makes front loading easier, with no bending or kneeling required.
- We have added one new model to our What to Buy list from the latest round of testing.

Although front-loader washing machines are more water and energy efficient (when washing in either warm or hot water) than top loaders, as well as gentler on clothes, many people are put off buying them because of their awkwardness in loading and unloading. Raising them to a more user-friendly height can alleviate this problem.

The Amazon Washing Machine/Dryer Stand 2110, available from most appliance retailers for $212, raises the washer or dryer about 38cm off the floor, has a lockable drawer for storage and can be used with most front loaders.

To install, the stand must first be put into position and levelled, and the washer (or dryer) is placed on it. The machine must then be levelled, and its feet clamped to the stand at each corner to prevent horizontal movement. Installing the unit takes a fair amount of effort, particularly in tight laundry spaces, but is a one-off task.

CHOICE assessed its ability to handle an unbalanced washing machine by putting it through a spin cycle with an unbalanced load. We repeated this test three times, and duplicated the process with another model. The clamps held firm and neither washing machine moved out of alignment with the stand. On two occasions the combined unit moved a few millimetres, just as a washer on the floor may do, but it was easily pushed back into position.

To check that it won't void your machine warranty, see Off the Floor in our washing machine test report, *CHOICE*, March 2008, for what some major manufacturers say about raising their machines. >

What to buy

SMALL (UP TO 5.5KG)

Fisher & Paykel MW512 (tp)	$749
Fisher & Paykel GW512 (tp)	$859

MEDIUM (6KG-7KG)

Asko Quattro W6362 (fr)	$2199
Miele Honeycomb Care W3725 (fr)	$1999
Fisher & Paykel GW612 (tp)	$969

LARGE (7.5KG OR MORE)

Fisher & Paykel Aquasmart WL80T65CW1 (tp) (A)	$1399
Fisher & Paykel Aquasmart WL80T65DW1 (tp) (A)	$1329
NEW **Bosch** Logixx 8 WAS28440AU (fr)	$1949

(fr) = Front loader (tp) = Top loader

(A) We received some feedback about the Fisher & Paykel Aquasmart models leaving detergent residue on clothes. Our rinse test only measures the soluble component of detergent left in the clothes, so we did not see this. Overall, they are very good performers and so remain in our What to Buy list, however if this problem occurs, our research as detailed in CHOICE, September 2008, (or www.choiceextra.com.au) offers some advice.

FOR PEOPLE WITH A DISABILITY

An occupational therapist from the Independent Living Centre, NSW, assessed the newly tested washing machines' suitability for people with certain disabilities. Unfortunately, none of their recommended models is in the What to Buy list.

- If you are in a wheelchair or have back pain, a front loading machine elevated off the floor will be easiest for you to use. All the front loaders in this test rate highly as their doors are easy to open and reach into, and the controls are at the front for easy access.
- If you have upper limb dysfunction or weakness, the Samsung WF7708N6W rates best, as it is easy to open and reach into and the controls and dispensers are easy to operate.
- Machines that can be preset and activated with just one or two actions are best for people with a cognitive impairment. The Electrolux Water Aid EWT806, Simpson Ezi Sensor SWT955SA and Simpson Eziset 750 22S750M are most suitable.
- For those with vision impairment, the Samsung SW50USP and Samsung SW80USP are recommended because the colour contrast between the door, dispenser and their surroundings are very good, as is the auditory feedback on the controls. The contrast between the controls and background is also good.

What to buy

The one new model that made it into the What to Buy list is profiled below. For profiles of the other models in the list, see *CHOICE*, September 2008 or March 2007, or go to www.choiceextra.com.au and click on those issues under "Washing machines" in the index.

7.5kg or larger washing machines

74% Bosch Logixx 8 WAS28440AU

PRICE $1949
SIZE 8kg
TYPE Front loader

GOOD POINTS

- Very good rinse effectiveness.
- Spin and water efficient, while still gentle on clothes.
- Has a relatively short "normal" cycle time for a front loader.
- Extra features include: gentle/delicates wash, out-of-balance correction, fast wash for smaller loads, variable spin speed (max. 1400rpm), time-remaining display, woollens and hand-wash programs, an extra rinse option and delay start.

BAD POINTS

- Scored only 67% for dirt removal. The manufacturer recommends using the "Intensive" button for a full or very dirty load. This is likely to improve the wash performance, but will also significantly increase the time.

About the rest

The table on page 50 summarises the performance scores, features and specifications for all the models tested. The following is why the rest of the newly tested models didn't make it into the What to Buy list.

UP TO 5.5KG

- The Samsung SW50USP is comparatively cheap to buy and is excellent at rinsing, but did not score well for spin efficiency and is very expensive to run (for its capacity) due to its poor water efficiency score.
- The Simpson Ezi Sensor SWT552SA is good for water efficiency (best in its category), but scored only 57% for spin efficiency and 67% for rinse performance, and is not gentle on clothes.

6KG-7KG

- The Bosch Maxx Classic WAE24271AU and Samsung WF7708N6W are gentle on clothes and scored very well for water efficiency, but scored only 59% and 66% respectively for dirt removal and has low rinse performance scores. But the Bosch has the quickest normal cycle time for a front loader.
- The Electrolux Water Aid EWT606SA has good dirt removal and water efficiency scores, but is let down by its gentleness, spin efficiency and rinse performance.

7.5KG OR LARGER

- The Fisher & Paykel WH80F60W1 and Whirlpool WFS1071BW have good dirt removal and gentleness scores, but are let down by their rinse scores. Neither does a true cold wash, the coldest option being 30°C for a normal wash. The Whirlpool has a very long cycle time, but offers a fast wash program for a half-load.
- The Fisher & Paykel GW712 is good for dirt removal, excellent at rinsing and has a short cycle time, but is let down by its lack of water efficiency.
- The Simpson Ezi Sensor SWT802SA has good dirt removal and water scores, but scored only 67% for rinse performance and 63% for spin efficiency, and isn't gentle on clothes.
- The Samsung SW80USP is excellent for rinse effectiveness, but on the downside has low spin efficiency, is a high user of water, and scored only 68% and 66% for dirt removal and gentleness respectively.

HOW RELIABLE HAVE SUBSCRIBERS FOUND THEIR BRANDS?

In our latest reliability survey, subscribers told us whether their washing machine (bought in or after 2000) had needed repair in the previous 12 months. While more subscribers now own a front loader, our survey found no significant difference in reliability between the two types. Overall, 10% had needed repair. The most commonly reported problem was the machine going out of balance.

Owners of Miele, Bosch and Fisher & Paykel washing machines were more likely to buy the same brand again, while significantly fewer would repurchase a Whirlpool, LG, Maytag or Ariston machine. And of those who wouldn't buy Ariston again, 29% said it "breaks down too often".

Differences of 9% or more between brands are meaningful. The numbers in brackets are the number of responses we received for each brand.

PERCENTAGE NOT NEEDING REPAIR	%
All washing machines (7000)	90
Bosch (328)	97
Miele (432)	95
Samsung (237)	92
Simpson (754)	92
Fisher & Paykel (1805)	90
Westinghouse (260)	89
Asko (296)	88
Whirlpool (697)	88
LG (698)	87
Maytag (207)	85
Kleenmaid (130)	83
Ariston (127)	77

What to look for

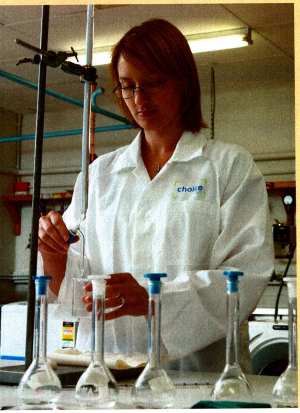
WASHING MACHINE FEATURES

For full information on what to look for when buying a washing machine, see *CHOICE*, March 2007, or go to www.choiceextra.com.au and click on that issue in the index under "Washing machines". Some features listed in the table (page 50) are explained here.

- **Out-of-balance correction** automatically detects and redistributes an out-of-balance load, either by spinning slowly before the full spin cycle or taking in more water (which is what most top loaders do). If you are concerned about high water use, opt for a machine without this feature or buy a front loader. Also, front loaders are less likely to go out of balance than top loaders.
- **Auto-sensing water level** This saves water, energy and time by automatically adjusting the water level according to the load and/or fabric type. Some machines also adjust the washing action.
- **Clear labelling and intuitive program options** Look for good-sized labels that are easy to read and stand out from the background. Make sure the controls are easy to use, and the programs suit your needs and are intuitive.

Selectable spin speed allows you to change the spin speed on some programs. A higher spin speed will result in drier clothes (good when using a dryer), while a lower speed is best for delicates or fabrics that crease easily.

If you're concerned about water usage, either buy a top loading machine without an out-of-balance correction feature, or buy a front loader instead.



HOW WE TEST

Dirt removal To see how much dirt the machines remove, our testers pin specially soiled swatches onto a standard load of washing and measure how much light is reflected from them before and after washing in cold water with a standard detergent. The more light, the cleaner the machine has washed the swatch.

Rinse performance is how well the machines rinse out the soluble components of the detergent. To measure, our testers add a marker chemical to the wash. At the end, they take a sample of the water remaining in the clothes to determine the amount of chemical left – the less there is, the better the rinse. In our last washing machines report we also looked at how to minimise effects of detergent residue. For details, refer to *CHOICE*, September 2008, or go to www.choiceextra.com.au.

Gentleness Testers attach swatches of easily frayed fabric to the washing and measure the unfrayed area before and after the wash.

Spin efficiency They weigh the clothes before and after the wash to see how much water is left in them.

Water efficiency Testers measure the amount of water used in a cycle (on a "normal" wash program). The score is based on how much water is used for each kilogram of washing – the less the better.

PRODUCT	PERFORMANCE									FEATURES		
Brand / model (in rank order within groups)	Type	Overall score (%)	Dirt removal score (%)	Rinse performance score (%)	Gentleness score (%)	Water efficiency score (%)	Spin efficiency score (%)	Water used (L, normal cycle)	Cycle time (min, normal wash)	Noise (dB)	Gentle / delicates cycle	Woollens cycle (machine / hand washable)	Out-of-balance correction
UP TO 5.5KG													
Fisher & Paykel MW512	Top / agitator	72	79	90	53	52	69	132	44	69	✓	✓/–	✓
Fisher & Paykel GW512	Top / agitator	71	77	90	52	53	69	131	45	67	✓	✓/–	✓
Simpson Eziset 36S550M	Top / agitator	68	70	83	56	58	61	115	49	60	✓	✓/–	ns
#Samsung SW50USP	Top / impeller	66	66	94	68	40	47	151	57	62	✓	–/–	ns
#Simpson Ezi Sensor SWT552SA	Top / agitator	66	70	67	46	77	57	63	69	66	✓	✓/–	✓
6KG TO 7KG													
Asko Quattro W6362 1600 rpm	Front	75	71	74	75	79	82	64	81	72	✓	✓/✓	✓
Miele Honeycomb Care W3725	Front	75 (E)	81	65	76	85	79	50	112	64	✓	✓/✓	✓
Fisher & Paykel GW612	Top / agitator	73	83	91	48	52	69	157	47	69	✓	✓/–	✓
AEG Electrolux Lavamat L74800	Front	72 (E)	74	66	76	83	76	60	108	71	✓	✓/✓	✓
Asko Quattro W6342	Front	72	72	57	78	83	74	53	86	69	✓	✓/✓	✓
Miele Honeycomb Care W 1712	Front	72 (E)	81	55	73	85	70	51	113	63	✓	✓/✓	✓
AEG L62800	Front	71 (E)	75	58	79	83	71	61	108	64	✓	✓/✓	✓
Asko Quattro W 6222 1200rpm	Front	71	72	55	76	83	70	52	101	69	✓	✓/✓	✓
Fisher & Paykel Aquasmart WL70T60C (A)	Top / impeller	71	80	58	57	81	67	66	58	57	✓	✓/–	✓
Fisher & Paykel Aquasmart WL70T60D (A)	Top / impeller	71	80	58	57	81	67	66	58	57	✓	✓/–	✓
Bosch Maxx Lifestyle WAE22460AU 1100rpm (B)	Front	69	61	68	79	82	72	64	77	66	✓	✓/✓	✓
#Bosch Maxx Classic WAE24271AU	Front	66	59	53	80	84	72	52	49	68	✓	✓/✓	✓
#Samsung WF7708N6W	Front	66	66	55	76	82	47	65	92	58	✓	✓/–	ns
#Electrolux Water Aid EWT606SA 6kg	Top / agitator	65	70	61	47	78	56	66	68	74	✓	✓/–	ns
7.5KG OR LARGER													
Fisher & Paykel Aquasmart WL80T65CW1 (A)	Top / impeller	75	81	74	58	81	74	76	58	63	✓	✓/–	✓
Fisher & Paykel Aquasmart WL80T65DW1 (A)	Top / impeller	75	81	74	58	81	74	76	58	63	✓	✓/–	✓
#Bosch Logixx 8 WAS28440AU (C)	Front	74	67	83	76	78	75	87	73	65	✓	✓/✓	✓
Bosch Logixx 8 WAS32740AU	Front	73	74	55	77	84	80	62	87	63	✓	✓/✓	✓
Maytag MAF8512AAW	Front	72	73	55	77	83	75	73	164	65	✓	✓/–	✓
Whirlpool WFS1285AW	Front	72	73	55	77	83	75	73	164	65	✓	✓/–	✓
Whirlpool 6ALSQ8000MW3	Top / agitator	71	78	86	55	58	53	157	47	62	✓	✓/–	
Whirlpool 6ALSR7244MW3	Top / agitator	71	78	86	55	58	53	157	47	62	✓	✓/–	
#Fisher & Paykel WH80F60W1	Front	70 (E)	72	59	76	83	73	68	114	64	✓	✓/✓	✓
#Whirlpool WFS1071BW	Front	70 (E)	75	58	75	84	69	59	151	66	✓	✓/✓	✓
Ariston Aqualtis AQXXD 149H	Front	69	71	46	74	86	78	58	116	65	✓	✓/✓	✓
#Fisher & Paykel GW712	Top / agitator	69	75	90	43	53	69	176	49	62	✓	✓/–	✓
#Simpson Ezi Sensor SWT802SA	Top / agitator	69	76	67	50	79	63	85	71	65	✓	✓/–	✓
Indesit Moon Smart Solutions SIXL126	Front	67 (E)	82	66	76	86	71	54	170	67	✓	✓/–	✓
#Samsung SW80USP	Top / impeller	67	68	93	66	42	53	231	69	59	✓	–/–	ns
Simpson Ezi Sensor SWT955SA	Top / agitator	66	73	55	51	81	64	92	74	66	✓	✓/–	✓
Electrolux Water Aid EWT806 8kg (D)	Top / agitator	65	76	46	49	80	62	79	72	67	✓	✓/–	ns
Simpson Eziset 750 22S750M	Top / agitator	64	62	65	62	70	66	113	59	66	✓	✓/–	ns

SPECIFICATIONS						COSTS		
Extra rinse	Tap connection	Coldest wash temperature for normal wash (°C)*	Capacity (kg)	Claimed dimensions (cm, H x W x D)	Contact	Running costs ($ / 10 years)	Running costs ($ / 10 years) + price ($)	Price ($)
	H & C, C	Cold	5.5	105 x 56 x 56	www.fp.com.au	582	1331	749
	H & C, C	Cold	5.5	105 x 56 x 56	www.fp.com.au	564	1423	859
	H & C	Cold	5.5	115 x 60 x 64	www.simpson.com.au	513	1152	639
✓	H & C, C	Cold	5.0	86 x 54 x 56	www.samsung.com	614	1113	499
	H & C	Cold	5.5	115 x 60 x 64	www.simpson.com.au	312	1001	689
✓	C only	Cold	6.0	85 x 60 x 59	www.asko.com.au	312	2511	2199
✓	C only	30	6.5	85 x 60 x 58	www.miele.com.au	369	2368	1999
	H & C, C	Cold	6.5	105 x 60 x 60	www.fp.com.au	688	1657	969
✓	C only	30	7.0	85 x 60 x 64	www.andico.com.au	418	2217	1799
✓	C only	Cold	6.0	85 x 60 x 59	www.asko.com.au	291	2190	1899
✓	C only	30	6.5	86 x 60 x 64	www.miele.com.au	336	2235	1899
✓	C only	30	7.0	85 x 60 x 64	www.andico.com.au	405	2004	1599
	C only	Cold	6.0	85 x 60 x 59	www.asko.com.au	319	2118	1799
	H & C	Cold	7.0	102 x 60 x 60	www.fp.com.au	364	1663	1299
	H & C	Cold	7.0	102 x 60 x 60	www.fp.com.au	364	1593	1229
✓	C only	Cold	7.0	85 x 60 x 59	www.boschappliances.com.au	342	1741	1399
✓	C only	Cold	6.5	84.2 x 60 x 59	www.boschappliances.com.au	256	1605	1349
✓	C only	Cold	7.0	84 x 60 x 55	www.samsung.com	762	1511	749
	H & C	Cold	6.0	115 x 60 x 64	www.electrolux.com.au	329	1128	799
	H & C	Cold	8.0	105 x 65 x 65	www.fp.com.au	399	1798	1399
	H & C	Cold	8.0	105 x 65 x 65	www.fp.com.au	399	1728	1329
✓	C only	Cold	8.0	84 x 60 x 59	www.boschappliances.com.au	443	2392	1949
✓	C only	Cold	8.0	85 x 60 x 59	www.boschappliances.com.au	353	2602	2249
	H & C, C	Cold	8.5	85 x 60 x 60	www.maytag.com.au	452	2351	1899
	H & C, C	Cold	8.5	85 x 60 x 60	www.whirlpool.com.au	452	1951	1499
✓	H & C	Cold	7.5	109 x 69 x 68	www.whirlpool.com.au	1153	2152	999
	H & C	Cold	7.5	109 x 69 x 68	www.whirlpool.com.au	1153	2102	949
✓	H & C, C	30	8.0	84 x 60 x 59	www.fp.com.au	447	1646	1199
✓	H & C	30	7.5	85 x 60 x 58	www.whirlpool.com.au	577	1426	849
✓	H & C	Cold	8.5	105 x 60 x 65	www.aristonchannel.com	370	2569	2199
	H & C	Cold	7.5	102 X 65 X 65	www.fp.com.au	757	1846	1089
	H & C	Cold	8.0	120 x 70 x 73	www.simpson.com.au	415	1364	949
	C only	60	7.5	85 x 60 x 54	www.aristonchannel.com	1146	2345	1199
✓	H & C	Cold	8.0	99 x 60 x 65	www.samsung.com	928	1827	899
	H & C	Cold	9.5	106 x 68 x 72	www.simpson.com.au	581	1640	1059
	H & C	Cold	8.0	107 x 67 x 72	www.electrolux.com.au	516	1525	1009
	H & C	Cold	7.5	106 x 68 x 72	www.simpson.com.au	706	1555	849

USING THE TABLE

Scores The overall score is made up of:

- Dirt removal: 40%
- Rinse performance: 20%
- Gentleness: 15%
- Water efficiency: 15%
- Spin efficiency: 10%

Cold wash penalty As the majority of Australians now wash in cold water straight from the tap, we have applied a small penalty in our overall score to models that cannot do a proper cold wash (at about 20°C) on the normal cycle. While the higher wash temperature may slightly increase a machine's scores for dirt removal and rinse effectiveness, it also means it's using more electricity than it would if it were able to do a true cold wash; our penalty compensates for this.

Dirt removal The machine we use to measure this (a spectrophotometer) is more accurate than the human eye – differences of about 6% are visible.

Features See What to Look For, page 49, for details.

Tap connection Some machines need both hot and cold water to operate; others can connect to cold water only and may need a special connector or sealing cap for the hot water inlet. A machine with a heater (front loaders only) can be particularly useful if you connect to cold only, as it still gives you the option of a warm or hot wash.

Dimensions are for the smallest box that fits around the machine, as stated by the manufacturer.

Running costs This is an estimate of how much it will cost for water and electricity over 10 years if you wash the equivalent of one load every day using a normal cycle, based on 17 cents per kWh of electricity and $1 per 1000L for water. It also includes electricity used when the machine is connected to a power source but not in use. It does not include detergent.

Price Recommended or average retail, as of November 2008.

TABLE NOTES

 # Newly tested models.
[Similar models.
** Cold = cold tap water (20°C).*
ns Not stated.

(A) We received some feedback about the Fisher & Paykel Aquasmart models leaving detergent residue on clothes. Our rinse test only measures the soluble component of detergent left in the clothes, so we did not see this. Overall they are very good performers and so remain in our What to Buy list, however if this problem occurs, our research detailed in CHOICE, *September 2008, (or at www.choiceextra.com.au) offers some advice.*

(B) This machine was also tested using the intensive option, which the manufacturer recommends for a full load. While using this option improves the dirt removal, the time taken to complete a run is significantly increased. Results are: Overall 74%; Dirt removal 74%; Rinse performance 69%; Gentleness 72%; Spin efficiency 74%; Water efficiency 81%; Water used 65.1L; Cycle time 158 minutes.

(C) The manufacturer recommends using the intensive button for a full load. Using this option will most likely improve the dirt removal and overall score, but time will also be increased.

(D) Discontinued, but may still be available in some stores.

(E) A penalty has been applied because the machine cannot do a cold wash – see Cold Wash Penalty, above.

Espresso on tap

Automatic espresso machines may not make the best-tasting coffee, but for convenience they're hard to beat.

nutshell

- An automatic espresso machine makes OK coffee at the simple push of a button or two, but a good manual or semi-automatic model will make better coffee.
- You need to program your automatic machine to make coffee just how you like it, so we've included ease of programming in the table.

For an immediate coffee hit, does real espresso at the push of a button sound more appealing than instant coffee from a tin? If so, you should consider an automatic espresso machine. Simply put your cup under the spout, press the button and it grinds the beans to make the espresso. Some even automatically froth the milk for a cappuccino or latte.

There is a price to pay for this convenience, however, in more ways than one. First, they're expensive; most of the models on test cost significantly more than the manual and semi-automatic ones in CHOICE's March 2008 test. Secondly, none of the automatic machines makes as good an espresso as the best manual and semi-automatic models, which give you greater control over optimising the taste of the espresso (see box, left).

MANUAL AND SEMI-AUTOMATIC MACHINES

These recommended models from our *CHOICE*, March 2008 test are still available.

Sunbeam Café Latte EM5600	$299
Krups K2 Plus Pump Espresso XP 4020	$249
Sunbeam Café Espresso Stainless EM3800	$179
Delonghi Living Innovation EC330S	$249
Vibiemme Domobar Manuale	$1499

One cup or two?

An automatic machine should be ideal for making two coffees at once, but unfortunately the Delonghis, Juras, Krups XP9000 and Sunbeam don't do so correctly. Rather than grinding a fresh batch of coffee for each cup, they instead grind a little more than one cup's worth and then put two cups of hot water through it, making each cup weak and watery. With these machines, you're better off making two single cups consecutively. Of the remaining machines, the "two-cup" option makes two espressos in rapid succession, giving much better results. This setting was not used in our taste test, where all the cups were made individually.

Choosing a machine

If you usually drink espressos or long blacks, choose a machine with a good taste test score.

If you prefer latte or cappuccino, the milk will mask the espresso flavour to some extent, so it's more important to choose a machine with a good milk frothing score. >

PRODUCT	PERFORMANCE									FEATURES						
						Coffee-making										
Brand / model (in rank order)	Overall score (%)	Coffee-making score (%)	Ease of use score (%)	Milk frothing score (%)	Programming score (%)	Taste score (%)	Temperature score (%)	Temperature consistency score (%)	Programmable on / off	Frothing mechanism	Cup warming plate	Cord storage	Hopper empty warning	Variable coffee strength	Digital display	Coffee temperature settings
DeLonghi Magnifica ESAM3500.S	69	66	75	55	90	65	70	70	✓/✓	Automatic	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓
Saeco Talea Touch	67	60	70	75 (A)	90	60	69	53	✓/✓	Manual	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓
DeLonghi Magnifica ESAM3000.B	66	65	73	45 (A)	80	65	66	65	-/-	Manual	✓		✓	✓		
Saeco Odea Go	65	61	65	75 (A)	80	60	68	65	-/-	Manual	✓		✓			
Jura Impressa J5	64	64	70	50	70	65	68	53	✓/✓	Automatic		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Krups Espresseria Automatic XP9000	64	60	78	55	70	55	78	78	✓/✓	Automatic	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Jura ENA5	62	60	72	50	70	60	64	60	-/✓	Automatic		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Krups Espresseria Automatic XP7200	58	53	82	35	60	45	85	80	-/✓	Manual	✓			✓		✓
Gaggia Platinum Vogue	57	57	58	75 (A)	40	55	64	68	-/-	Manual	✓		✓	✓		
Sunbeam Intuitive Digital EM8910	53	36	73	80	90	25	83	80	-/✓	Manual	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓

HOW WE TEST

Preparation Our tester, a trained barista, first pumps a litre of hot water through each machine to remove any factory smells and tastes, then makes 12 cups of espresso coffee (not for tasting).
Ease of use Our tester checks how easy the machines are to use, trying the controls, filling the water tank and bean hopper, making a coffee, and cleaning inside and out.
Frothing He experiments with each machine to find the best way to froth milk, looking for fine, pourable froth.
Programming He checks how easy the machine is to program, looking for intuitive labelling and indicators.
Temperature He measures the average temperature and temperature consistency of four consecutive coffees for each machine, first when the machine is just turned on, then after 15 minutes.
Taste Three experts test the espressos in a blind tasting, checking the colour and thickness of the crema (the tan-coloured foam on top of an espresso), aroma, flavour, mouthfeel (creaminess or wateriness) and aftertaste.

Meet the expert taste testers

Matthew Gee **David Gee** **Fiona Mair**

David and Matthew Gee are from Barista Basics Coffee Academy in Sydney. Fiona Mair, CHOICE's home economist, has extensive experience in taste tests and as a cooking judge.

USING THE TABLE

Scores The overall score is made up of:
- Coffee-making: 60%
- Ease of use: 20%
- Milk frothing: 10%
- Programming: 10%.

Coffee-making score consists of:
- Taste: 80%
- Coffee temperature: 10%
- Temperature consistency (when making four cups of coffee in quick succession): 10%.

Heat-up time The time taken to heat the machine to operating temperature (not scored).
Price Recommended retail, as of November 2008.

TABLE NOTES

(A) Tested with the froth enhancer removed as it gives better results.

IFICATIONS

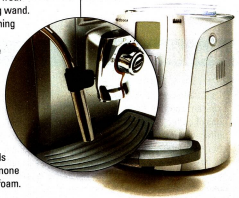
Dimensions (cm, H x W x D)	Weight (kg)	Contact	Price ($)
37 x 28 x 39	10.7	www.delonghi.com.au	1999
37 x 31 x 43	9.3	www.saeco.com.au	1899
37 x 28 x 39	9.6	www.delonghi.com.au	899
37 x 30 x 38	8.2	www.saeco.com.au	899
34 x 29 x 43	10.6	www.globalcoffee.com.au	2495
40 x 29 x 48	11.3	Groupe SEB: 02 9748 7944	2300
36 x 24 x 45	9.2	www.globalcoffee.com.au	1295
36 x 25 x 34	7	Groupe SEB: 02 9748 7944	1000
38 x 32 x 42	10.2	www.gaggia.com.au	1499
38 x 30 x 39	9.1	www.sunbeam.com.au	799

What to look for

AUTOMATIC ESPRESSO MACHINE ESSENTIALS

- **Clear and simple controls** Digital displays are generally easier to understand than indicator lights, especially when programming the machine.
- An **adjustable grinder** lets you adjust the grind to suit the bean and machine. Check the grinder mechanism is safely inaccessible, or that the grinder automatically shuts off when the hopper lid is removed. The Saeco models have the latter feature; on all the rest, the grinder mechanism is not accessible.
- **Variable coffee strength** This allows you to adjust the intensity of the coffee to your taste.
- **Footprint** A big espresso machine is fine if you have plenty of bench space in your kitchen, but you may want one that takes up less space.
- **Cup warming tray** All but the Jura models have one.
- **Other useful features** All the tested models have a "water tank empty" reminder, height adjustable spout to accommodate larger cups and adjustable coffee volume.

Removable froth enhancer
Some machines come with a froth enhancer on the milk frothing wand. This is intended to make frothing easier, but often it produces large bubbles rather than the fine foam that's suitable for latte and cappuccino. If you can remove the enhancer you may find it easier to produce fine, velvety foam. The Krups XP9000, Delonghi ESAM3500.S and Jura models froth the milk automatically; none of these produced very fine foam.



Shop around We paid considerably less than recommended retail price for the tested machines. Many large retailers have demonstration models, so ask the sales assistant to make you a coffee from the machine you're interested in.

Automatic coffee machines should be ideal for making two coffees at once, but not all on test do it correctly.

What to buy

69% DELONGHI Magnifica ESAM3500.S

PRICE $1999

GOOD POINTS

- Excellent for ease of programming.
- Excellent controls.
- Digital display.
- Programmable on/off switch.
- Cup warming plate.
- Warning when bean hopper is empty.
- Can use pre-ground coffee.
- Adjustable coffee strength and temperature.
- Very easy to empty the dregs container.

BAD POINTS

- Grinder is not easy to adjust.
- Doesn't produce fine milk foam.
- Doesn't make two cups of coffee correctly.

67% SAECO Talea Touch

PRICE $1899

GOOD POINTS

- Excellent for ease of programming.
- Excellent controls.
- Digital display.
- Good milk frothing (but only when the froth enhancer is removed).
- Programmable on/off switch.
- Cup warming plate.
- Warning when bean hopper is empty.
- Can use pre-ground coffee.
- Adjustable coffee strength and temperature.
- Swivel base for easy access to sides and rear.

BAD POINTS

- Grinder is not easy to adjust.
- Scored only 53% for making consecutive cups of coffee with even temperature.
- Exterior is not particularly easy to clean.

66% DELONGHI Magnifica ESAM3000.B

PRICE $899

GOOD POINTS

- Cup warming plate.
- Warning when bean hopper is empty.
- Adjustable coffee strength.
- Can use pre-ground coffee.
- Very easy to empty the dregs container.

BAD POINTS

- Grinder is not easy to adjust.
- Poor score, 45%, for frothing milk.
- Doesn't make two cups of coffee correctly.

65% SAECO Odea Go

PRICE $899

GOOD POINTS

- Good milk frothing (but only when the froth enhancer is removed).
- Cup warming plate.
- Warning when bean hopper is empty.
- Swivel base for easy access to sides and rear.

BAD POINTS

- Grinder is not easy to adjust.
- Controls are not particularly easy to use.
- Exterior is not particularly easy to clean.

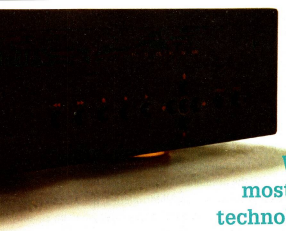
About the rest

WORTH CONSIDERING

- The Jura Impressa J5 scored equal best in the taste test and has excellent controls, but its grinder can't be adjusted, it doesn't make two cups of coffee correctly, scored only 53% for making consecutive cups of coffee with even temperature, and doesn't return to the last setting used after switching off so you may need to program it every time.
- The Krups Espresseria Automatic XP9000 has excellent controls and is easy to use, but didn't score as well as the recommended models in the taste test, and doesn't make two cups of coffee correctly.
- The Jura ENA5 has excellent controls, but also a small water tank, its grinder cannot be adjusted, it doesn't make two cups of coffee correctly, and doesn't return to the last setting used after switching it off.

NOT RECOMMENDED

- The Krups Espresseria Automatic XP7200 makes poor espresso and is the worst for frothing milk.
- The Gaggia is hard to program, due to poorly marked controls; its indicator lights are hard to see; its grinder is not easy to adjust; and it doesn't return to the last setting used after switching off.
- The Sunbeam does not make two cups of coffee correctly, and doesn't return to the last setting used after switching off. More importantly, it is the worst in the test for making espresso, with only a 25% score in the taste test. We contacted the company in case the machine was faulty; they claimed there was nothing wrong with it and sent us different coffee to try, but this made no difference.



Smart TV

Watch what you want, when you want – most of the time. CHOICE reviews the latest technology for recording your favourite shows.

nutshell

- Hard-drive apacity is nproving in VRs, but most the models n test could be asier to use.
- TiVo and oxtel iQ2 offer ifferent options om the current ange of HD twin uner DVRs.

Does it sometimes feel like there's nothing to watch on TV for weeks and suddenly three great shows appear in the same time slot? The solution may be to get a twin-tuner digital video recorder (DVR).

DVRs have replaced VCRs as the modern way to record a single TV program to view at a later date. CHOICE tested 11 DVRs that incorporate at least two HD tuners and an internal hard drive that can record two shows simultaneously, allowing you to watch a third show live using your TV tuner. We found while they worked well for recording single programs, they could be easier to use for more complex recording tasks.

What's the go on TiVo?

The success of the relatively expensive TiVo (see "TiVo on Review" at www.choice.com.au/TiVo), a product claiming ease of use as one of its main assets, indicates many people want to record their TV shows quickly and easily – hence the development of similar alternative recorders.

None of the DVRs on test, except the Foxtel iQ2, TiVo and Beyonwiz DP-S1, rated well for reception. The iQ2 achieved a perfect reception score because the model we tested uses a dedicated cable signal from Foxtel. The reception for the TiVo box was on par with the top-performing TVs we regularly test. Reception may not be an issue if you live in an area where the digital TV signal is good. However, if your current digital TV reception tends to be affected by an aeroplane passing overhead or by using the microwave or vacuum cleaner, you might like to seek assurance from the retailer that you can return the DVR if it does not deliver good enough reception.

None of these DVRs has an inbuilt DVD recorder, although the Beyonwiz DP-S1 does include a DVD player. So if you want to get your recorded show off the DVR, you'll need to attach either a DVD recorder or VCR and record the video from the DVR onto a disc or tape.

Our tester had to deal with a series of firmware updates and revisions that seem to plague some of >

What to buy

76% FOXTEL iQ2

PRICE From $40 per month plus $10 per month for the HD box

GOOD POINTS

- Installation conducted by Foxtel technician.
- Automatic firmware upgrades.
- Good on-screen menu and display.
- Very good ease of use rating for instant recording.

BAD POINTS

- Very high standby power use.
- Poor rating for recordings management – no thumbnails, no renaming, only supports single file deletion with no confirmation dialogue.
- Very poor rating for front panel display – limited to power and playback indicators only.

74% TIVO TCD663160

PRICE $700

GOOD POINTS

- Automatic firmware upgrades.
- Very good on-screen menu and display.
- Very good ease of use rating for instant recording.
- Good ease of use rating for timeshift (see Did You Know?, page 56).

BAD POINTS

- Very high standby power use.
- Needs an internet connection.
- Cannot connect to a DVD recorder.
- No front panel controls.
- Very poor rating for front panel display – limited to a few status LEDs only.

66% BEYONWIZ DP-S1

PRICE $1299

GOOD POINTS

- Supports file streaming and playback of a wide range of different video file formats.
- Good ease of use rating for instant recording.
- DVD player incorporated into unit.
- Has analog video and audio inputs.
- Remote can control some TVs.

BAD POINTS

- Very high standby power use.

About the rest

- The DigiCrystal, Palsonic, DGTEC and Wintal models all have identical remote controls, all scored similar results for the tuner test and all are easy to use except the DGTEC, which was let down by its performance in recording multiple shows in the simple timer recording test.
- The Digitalview has more than enough space for the average user to store HD TV shows and is reasonably easy to use. However, the hefty price tag is still difficult to justify.
- Transferring content such as a TV show to a computer or other networked device should be relatively simple with the Beyonwiz models, as both have ethernet connections and networked device browsing built in. They also have card readers and USB ports. However, the overall reception performance of the DP-P2 is significantly worse than the Beyonwiz DP-S1, included in our What to Buy list.
- The Homecast has lots of connection options, including ethernet and four USB ports. However, our tester found it the most difficult to operate.
- While ease of use of the Topfield is below par, it does support recording directly to an external USB drive. The Topfield also has trouble dealing with impulse noise in our reception test, which could indicate an inability to effectively deal with random occurrences such as fluorescent lights, air conditioners and pool pumps. If you already own a Topfield and are confident that your digital TV reception is good, you might still be happy with the added features on offer, such as recording to an external drive and wireless streaming via a USB dongle.

Did you know ?

All the models we tested incorporate a timeshift feature This allows you to pause the current show and the DVR records it. Unlike a VCR, timeshift allows you to continue watching the show once you've returned, even if it hasn't finished. When you press play, the DVR resumes playing where you left, while still recording the program. Timeshift is handy as you can skip ads and fast-forward parts of the show you don't want to watch, until the time when the recording catches up to the live TV show.

< these DVRs and should not be tolerated. Many of these firmware updates are no more than bug fixes due to sloppy product development and rushing models onto the market before they've been thoroughly tested.

All the products in this test scored poorly for standby energy consumption. Unfortunately, the two best overall performers also use the most power when on standby.

Horses for courses

Our What to Buy list (page 55) includes three different types of DVRs that may appeal to different users.

- Although the iQ2 has very good HD reception for both free-to-air and a selection of Foxtel-only channels, accurately records overlapping programs and is simple to set up and operate, this is not the best solution if you are not interested in having Foxtel channels. Also, while Foxtel regularly runs promotions with free installation, you may have to pay extra to have your Foxtel box installed.
- Users wanting a simpler DVR experience will appreciate the structured menus and guides available on the TiVo. However, more experienced DVR users who may be on their second or third model may become frustrated when it attempts to second-guess the shows you might like and record them without checking with you first.
- The Beyonwiz DP-S1 has gone through several firmware upgrades over the past year to correct bugs and add features, and is a much-improved product as a result. If you have the time and inclination to apply updates when needed, the Beyonwiz has a lot to offer. ■

PRODUCT	PERFORMANCE				FEATURES								SPECIFICATI
Brand / model (in rank order)	Overall score (%)	Ease of use score (%)	Reception score (%)	Standby power rating (W)	Direct recording to external drive	Pay-TV recording	USB ports (front, rear)	Ethernet port	Card reader*	S-video output	Coaxial digital audio output	Timer limits: programs / period	Dimensions (cm, H x W x D)
Foxtel iQ2	77	61	100 (A)	22.1	√ (B)	√	1, 1 (B)	1(B)	none	√	√	ns / 14 days	6.5 x 40.5 x 29.
TiVo TCD663160	74	62	92	23.4	√ (B)		0, 2	1	none	√		ns / ns	8.5 x 42 x 33.5
Beyonwiz DP-S1	66	64	69	4.5			1, 1	1	1 x CF, 1 x MS/SD	√	√	200 / unlimited	7 x 43 x 35
DigiCrystal HDT-9750P	59	63	53	13.9			0, 0	0	none			ns / unlimited	7 x 36 x 26.5
Digitalview DVR-810	59	65	51	4.7			0, 1	0	none	√	√	32 / 30 days	9 x 43 x 29
Palsonic HDD320G	59	63	53	13.8			0, 0	0	none		√	ns / unlimited	7 x 36 x 26.5
Wintal PVR2HD	58	62	51	14.1			0, 0	0	none			ns / unlimited	7 x 36 x 26.5
DGTEC DG-HD320PVR	53	53	54	15.1			0, 0	0	none			ns / unlimited	7 x 36 x 26.5
Beyonwiz DP-P2	52	61	38	4.6		√	1, 1	1	1 x CF, 1 x MS/SD	√	√	100 / unlimited	6.5 x 39 x 31
Homecast HT8000PVR	47	42	55	18.0			1, 3	1	none	√		50 / 1 year	6.5 x 36 x 28
Topfield TF7100HDPVRt	45	54	32	7.6	√		1, 1	1	none	√	√	ns / 1 year	7 x 43 x 27.5

What to look for

DESIRABLE DVR FEATURES

- **Direct recording to an external drive** is a handy feature, particularly if you wish to keep a lot of the shows you have recorded for future viewing.
- **Pay-TV recording** is not widely supported, with only the Beyonwiz DP-P2 offering analog video and audio inputs.
- **Timeshift** feature – see Did You Know?, page 56.
- An **ethernet port** can provide network connectivity between the DVR and video files on your computer, as well as allowing you to download firmware upgrades and video content from the internet.
- **Video connections** Your DVR needs to have connections that match the ones on your TV and any other device you want to connect. Apart from **SCART** and **HDMI**, all connections require separate audio links.
- **Composite** is the lowest video quality, followed by **S-Video** and then **Component** as the highest quality analog video options available.
- **HDMI** and **Toslink**, see Cable Guise, page 26.

A good **remote control** is crucial, as many of the DVRs are difficult to operate using just the front control panel. The remote should have buttons that are sized, shaped and spaced so you can easily find and press them individually. They should also be grouped according to function and the buttons you use most should be the most prominent. Being able to control your TV with the DVR remote can also help keep the remote count to a minimum.

A **USB connection** allows the playback of video and audio on a Flash drive or USB external drive.

USING THE TABLE

Scores The overall score is made up of:
- Ease of use: 60%
- Reception: 40%
- Energy on standby: all models scored 0% (see How We Test).

Features For an explanation of features, see What to Look For, above. Features common to all models: outputs for Toslink audio, HDMI, at least two HD tuners, Composite and Component video.

Price Recommended retail, December 2008.

Timer limits: programs/period Most models on test indicate how many recordings you can cue up at once. Some models allow you to set a timer to record a program literally years into the future, while others only allow you to plan ahead by a month.

Hard drive capacity shows the storage capabilities of the internal drive in the DVR. The **claimed recording capacities for HD and SD** give an indication of approximately how much you can expect to record onto your DVR.

Claimed recording capacity – HD, hours	Claimed recording capacity – SD, hours	Contact	Price ($)
30	90	www.hd.foxtel.com.au	From $50 (C)
30	60	www.tivo.com.au	700
30	65	www.beyonwiz.com.au	1299 (D)
30	70	www.digicrystal.com.au	449
131	353	www.digitalview.com.au	1099
60	125	www.palsonic.com.au	499
75	125	www.wintal.com.au	499
ns	100	www.dgtec.com.au	499
40	100	www.beyonwiz.com.au	999
40	100	www.digitalpg.com.au	599
43	172	www.itopfield.com.au	899

TABLE NOTES

**CF Compact Flash. MS Memory Stick. SD Secure Digital. ns Not stated. (A) Cable model. (B) Has port, but functionality not yet provided. (C) $10 per month for HD box and from $40 per month subscription.*

HOW WE TEST

Ease of use Our testers look for an auto-tuning system that is informative and simple to use. They make instant and timer-set recordings and check the menus for ease of understanding, navigation and clarity. They also play back recordings to check the quality and range of functions that are possible.

The testers program each model to record three one-hour events with starting times 30 minutes apart. Testers assess the remote control for how easy it is to use for common functions. They also see to what extent the front panel controls can operate various tasks without using the remote control.

Reception Each model is tested to determine the relative performance of its HD tuners. The DVRs are initially provided with a perfect digital TV reception signal. Various forms of interference are then introduced to replicate problems likely to be encountered in a normal situation. Measurements for the ability to deal with impulse noise and signal fading help to reveal how the models we test would work when dealing with things such as aeroplanes, wireless home networks and even a microwave operating nearby. The Foxtel is connected via a cable connection and therefore scored 100%.

A recording made to the internal hard drive of each product is played back and compared with a digital TV broadcast to determine if any variation in quality is noticeable. All models include the latest firmware upgrades available at the time of testing.

Standby power Our testers connect the DVRs to a regulated power supply and power meter and record standby energy consumption. Products that don't achieve a standby power rating of 1W or less, as required by Minimum Energy Performance Regulations (to be introduced by 2012), score 0%.

Brushing up on spin

Our trialists put powered toothbrushes to the test.

nutshell

▶ Rechargeable toothbrushes were the pick of our user trial.

It's been four years since CHOICE trialled electric toothbrushes, so to find out what's changed on the market we conducted a user trial of 10 new models ranging in price from $5 to $190.

According to a Cochrane Collaboration review of manual versus powered toothbrushes, using "powered toothbrushes with a rotation oscillation action reduces plaque and gingivitis more than manual tooth brushing". The table below shows which models use this action. Regardless of whether you're using a manual or electric toothbrush, however, keep in mind that dentists still advise at least a two-minute clean.

We tested the battery powered toothbrushes with alkaline batteries, but despite the low initial and recurring costs in purchase, none of the battery powered models scored well compared with most of the rechargeable models. It's also worth considering the environmental impact of disposing of alkaline batteries. Rechargeable batteries are a better option and for the top-rated brands, see *CHOICE* December 2008. ■

HOW WE TEST

Go to www.choice.com.au/toothbrush to see how we tested the toothbrushes on trial.

About the rest

The Braun Oral-B Professional Care 5000 rated very well overall but was not quite as good when attaching and removing the head. It also has the lowest number of uses per charge.

The rest of the toothbrushes are let down by their cleaning effectiveness.

A separate tool needs to be bought to remove the head of the Braun Oral-B CrossAction Power Max, which seems short-sighted. Its large brush head gives it poor manoeuvrability.

What to look for

ELECTRIC TOOTHBRUSH ESSENTIALS

- **Rechargeable battery** Half the toothbrushes trialled have a built-in rechargeable battery pack that can be recharged from its own AC adaptor.
- **Speed** Different speeds easily accessed from the front of the brush can make it easy to choose your preference.
- **Brush head container** Useful for families or couples.
- **Range of heads** Choosing a brush with a range of heads, such as interdental, tongue cleaning and teeth brightening, can help give you the best brush possible.

Charge level display Shows when you should recharge the toothbrush – useful if you take your brush with you when travelling or regularly unplug your charger.

PRODUCT	PERFORMANCE							FEATURES						SPECIFICATIO	
Brand / model (in rank order)	Overall score (%)	Effectiveness at cleaning teeth score (%)	Ease of manoeuvrability score (%)	Comfort of grip score (%)	Attaching head score (%)	Removing head score (%)	Measured uses per charge	Charging unit wall mountable	Charging indicator light	Timer	Speeds	Pressure sensor	Indicator bristles	Battery type	Full charge time (hours)
Braun Oral-B Professional Care 8500	90	90	75	95	95	95	40	√	√	√	2+	√	√	R	16
Braun Oral-B Professional Care 9500 Triumph	90	95	80	75	95	95	38	√	√	√	2+	√	√	R	12
Braun Oral-B Vitality Precision Clean	88	85	95	70	95	95	28				1		√	R	16
Braun Oral-B Professional Care 5000	86	85	90	75	90	90	25	√	√	√	1	√	√	R	12
Colgate Actibrush Multi-Action	61	50	65	65	85	80	83		na		1			AAA	na
SpinBrush Pro-Clean	55	50	50	55	75	65	275		na		1			AA	na
Colgate Motion	53	45	55	55	65	70	255		na		1			AAA	na
Abode QSQ-22101	46	25	70	55	70	70	278		na		1			AA	na
Braun Oral-B CrossAction Power Max	46	55	45	65	15	10	40				1		√	R	16

What to buy

90% BRAUN ORAL-B Professional Care 8500

PRICE $150

TRIALIST COMMENTS

"The timers are great – means I don't have to concentrate when brushing."
"Teeth felt cleaner; cleaning feels a little more in depth."
"It was a bit too strong so couldn't brush for long."

90% BRAUN ORAL-B Professional Care 9500 Triumph

PRICE $190

TRIALIST COMMENTS

- "My teeth feel cleaner than they ever have."
- "A good shape for a comfortable grip."
- "I love this toothbrush; it has an interactive timer that smiles when you complete the cycle."
- "Kept pressing the options button rather than On/Off."

Money does equate to quality with powered toothbrushes, but there are still bargains to be found.

88% BRAUN ORAL-B Vitality Precision Clean

PRICE $40

TRIALIST COMMENTS

"Great for cleaning teeth in a fast and effective way."
"Cleaned teeth very thoroughly. Massaged gums."
"A really good brush – the thing that would make it excellent would be a 30-second timer."
"Small circular head requires the brush to be moved around more, but is better for access to back teeth."

BEST BUY

USING THE TABLE

Scores The overall score is made up of:

- Effectiveness at cleaning teeth: 50%
- Ease of manoeuvrability: 20%
- Comfort of the grip: 10%
- Attaching the head: 10%
- Removing the head: 10%

Measured uses per charge are based on how long the toothbrush battery lasted; each use is based on a two-minute brushing of the teeth.

Timer is an indication of when to change mouth quadrants or the recommended two minutes.
Pressure sensor can prevent gum damage by reducing the pressure if you press too hard.
Indicator bristles show when it's time to replace the toothbrush head.
Price Recommended retail, as of November 2008.

TABLE NOTES

na Not applicable.
ns Not stated.
R Rechargeable.
** We found none of the rechargeable ones would cost more than $3 per year in power. Rechargeable batteries instead of alkaline will lower costs.*

*** Based on four replacements per year and cost is for two heads to a package, unless otherwise stated.*
**** Total cost for four brush heads and battery replacement if battery powered.*
(A) Different uses for each head.
(B) The brush heads are no longer available, but can be replaced by the Actibrush heads.

			COSTS			
	Brush heads supplied	Contact	Annual power / battery cost ($) *	Cost / two replacement heads ($) **	Annual running cost ($) ***	Price ($)
ion / oscillation	4 (A)	www.oralb.com/au	< 3.00	31.50 / 4	31.50	150.00
ion / oscillation	2 (A)	www.oralb.com/au	< 3.00	23.00	46.00	190.00
ion / oscillation	1	www.oralb.com/au	< 3.00	31.50 / 4	31.50	40.00
ion / oscillation	1	www.oralb.com/au	< 3.00	31.50 / 4	31.50	80.00
tion only	1	www.colgate.com.au	27.15	10.00	47.15	16.00
ion / oscillation and translational	1	www.spinbrush.com	7.89	9.00	25.89	13.60
tion only	1	www.colgate.com.au	9.05	10.00 (B)	29.05	10.50
ion / oscillation	1	www.woolworths.com.au	10.52	2.00 / 4	12.52	5.00
ion / oscillation	1	www.oralb.com/au	< 3.00	10.00	20.00	25.00

UNSUSTAINABLE BRUSHING

The Colgate 360 Microsonic head cannot be replaced, which means you have to replace the whole toothbrush four times a year – not a particularly sustainable practice. We included it in our trial, but excluded it from our results table.
Given that our trialists also felt it was poor at cleaning their teeth, we would recommend giving it a miss.

The perfect blend

Looking for a light and portable blender, rather than a full-blown food processor? One of these will fit the bill.

nutshell

▶ On test: 17 handheld blenders ranging from $10 to $209, some with chopper/processor attachments and some without.
▶ Seven can handle harder foods; the rest are practical for soft foods only.

When you have a small food-processing job and don't want to pull out your bulky processor, a handheld, or stick blender does the job. Of the 17 on test, all are very good or excellent for blending and emulsifying, but some models' ease of use can leave a lot to be desired.

The shape of the grip can have a big influence on how comfortable the blender is to hold. Try out the grip when you're shopping to get a feel for how it fits in your hand. Test the weight as well, as lighter blenders are easier to grip and some of our top-scoring models were among the lightest of the lot.

Safety is just as important as comfort, however, and blenders can be one of the most significant dangers in the kitchen. Their sharp, exposed blades make quick work of many foods, so ensuring your hands – and other smaller hands – stay clear of them is paramount. The good news is all the models tested have guards that partially cover the blades. See our warning, below right.

The models in the first group in the table blend, emulsify, chop, grind and process hard foods. They come with a chopper/processor attachment you affix to the blender. The second group shows models that can only blend/emulsify. The least expensive ones generally don't come with extras such as jugs and chopping/whisk attachments, but you may be able to purchase them separately. >

What to buy $

HARD/DRY AND SOFT FOODS

Philips Hand Blender HR1363	$80
Sunbeam StickMaster Plus SM6400	$60

SOFT FOODS ONLY

Bamix Basic	$209
Braun Multiquick MR 400 Plus	$60
Cuisinart CSB-76A SmartStick	$70
Tefal HB802 Click N Mix 600	$100

PRODUCT	PERFORMANCE								FEATURES		SPECIFICATIO	
Brand / model (in rank order within groups)	**Overall score (%)**	**Ease of use score (%)**	**Performance score (%)**	**Blending score (%)**	**Emulsifying score (%)**	**Chopping score (%)**	**Grinding score (%)**	**Processing score (%)**	**Chopper attachment**	**Whisk attachment**	**Dishwasher safe (shaft and accessories)**	**Weight (g)**
HARD / DRY AND SOFT FOODS												
# **Philips** Hand Blender HR1363	88	78	98	100	100	100	90	100	√		√	74
Sunbeam StickMaster Plus SM6400	82	68	96	100	100	100	80	100	√	√	√	80
# **Sunbeam** StickMaster Pro SM8650	80	70	90	100	100	75	100	75	√	√	√	97
Kenwood Wizzard Pro HB665	80	70	90	100	100	100	75	75	√	√	ns	79
# **Breville** BSB500	80	70	90	100	100	100	75	75	√	√	ns	10
Kenwood Hand Blender HB520	78	75	80	100	100	100	50	50	√		√	83
Kambrook Essentials Stick Mix KSB7	72	68	76	100	80	100	50	50	√		√	82
SOFT FOODS ONLY												
Bamix Basic	89	78	100	100	100	na	na	na				99
# **Braun** Multiquick MR 400 Plus	87	73	100	100	100	na	na	na			√	58
# **Cuisinart** CSB-76A SmartStick	87	73	100	100	100	na	na	na			√	73
# **Tefal** HB802 Click N Mix 600	87	73	100	100	100	na	na	na	(B)	(B)	√	78
# **Breville** HB95	85	70	100	100	100	na	na	na			ns	10
# **Kenwood** HB615	85	70	100	100	100	na	na	na			√	77
# **Sunbeam** StickMaster SM6200	83	65	100	100	100	na	na	na			√	80
# **Breville** BSB300 Wizz Stick	77	53	100	100	100	na	na	na			ns	91
# **Solutions** Stickmixer AP649 (A)	77	58	95	100	90	na	na	na			ns	67
# **Maxim** HB-01 (A)	75	50	100	100	100	na	na	na			ns	67

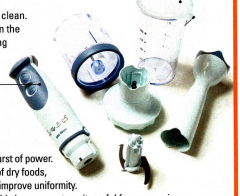
What to look for

HANDHELD BLENDER ESSENTIALS

- **A comfortable grip** that's easy to hold. The On/Off button should be easily accessible.
- **Sealed controls** will make it less likely for food to get into any crevices.
- **No obvious wide joints** in the material will make it easier to clean.
- **Cord position** should not get in the way of your hand when holding the blender.

Jug/beaker A tall, narrow cup useful for puréeing or blending.

Soft non-slip grip material makes it less likely the blender will slip from your grasp.



USEFUL FEATURES

- **Pulse function** gives a short burst of power. It's useful for small quantities of dry foods, to help distribute the load and improve uniformity.
- **Grinder/chopper/processor** This is a separate unit useful for processing ingredients such as nuts, bread, coffee, herbs, spices and raw vegetables. It's a very handy attachment when dealing with small quantities, as it saves getting out a large food processor.
- **Whipper/beater** is an attachment specifically for whipping cream and beating egg whites. For some models it's a large whisk, for others it's a disc-shaped attachment.
- **Wall mount** for easy-to-access storage of the blender and accessories.

FOR PEOPLE WITH A DISABILITY

We assessed the blenders' suitability for people with a disability, according to guidelines supplied by the Independent Living Centre, NSW.

- If you have problems with your **hands or wrists**, the most suitable models are easy to clean and lightweight, with easy-to-press buttons and a large grip area. Look for one with blades that either don't need to be changed, or are easily changed using little force or manipulation. If possible, use the pulse action to avoid having to use prolonged force to operate the blender. The Philips and Tefal are both recommended.
- If you are **vision-impaired**, it's very difficult to recommend any model, for safety reasons. While a blade guard surrounds the blade from the top and partly covers its sides, it's exposed at the bottom. You could injure yourself if you accidentally touched the blade area, or if the moving blade came into contact with the cord.
- For people with mild **cognitive impairment**, simplicity is the key and most of the models can be recommended. Different people might find the labelling on some a little unclear, but they're all very simple to operate, with one or two speeds. The fewer buttons to choose from, the better.

	Price ($)
v.philips.com.au	80
v.sunbeam.com.au	60
v.sunbeam.com.au	90
v.kenwood-australia.com	80
v.breville.com.au	90
v.kenwood-australia.com	40
v.kambrook.com.au	70
v.cambur.com.au	209
v.braun.com	60
v.cuisinart.com.au	70
v.tefal.com.au	100
v.breville.com.au	70
v.kenwood-australia.com	50
v.sunbeam.com.au	40
v.breville.com.au	55
v.kmart.com.au	10
v.maximhousewares.com	25

USING THE TABLE

Scores The overall score is made up of:

- Ease of use: 50%
- Performance: 50%

Price Recommended retail, as of December 2008.

TABLE NOTES

 # Newly tested models.
na Not applicable. Manufacturers do not advise you blend these foods. Total performance score is the average score of the tests performed.
ns Not stated.
(A) Discontinued, but may still be available in some shops.
(B) Tefal claims its separate blades can chop/whisk, however it doesn't come with an enclosed container for chopping or whisking.

HOW WE TEST

Ease of use We assess ease of use and cleaning, weighted as follows:

- Controls: 25% (including position, type and markings)
- General comfort and grip: 25%
- Cleaning: 50% (including general cleaning and disassembly of parts for cleaning)

Performance This score includes individual performance scores, weighted equally, for:

Soft foods

- Blending: potato and leek soup
- Emulsifying: mayonnaise

Hard foods

- Chopping: carrots
- Grinding: curry paste (hard ingredients)
- Processing: pesto sauce (softer ingredients)

The hard food tests were carried out if the product's instructions said it could handle them and the appropriate attachments and if the blades were included. The performance score of all models in the hard/dry foods section of the table was therefore a combination of all five soft and hard food tests.

Warning: beware fingers!

CHOICE's Publisher, Anny Friis, was blending baby food when a piece of lamb got stuck in the blades of her handheld blender. Putting it down, she used her fingers to remove the piece, accidentally leaning on the pulse action button. A visit to the hospital and five excruciating stitches later, Anny was told she was very lucky the blade had missed a tendon by a fraction of a millimetre; otherwise she would have needed microsurgery. So beware – despite a blender being a small tool, its high speed and sharp blades should always be treated with caution. Turn it off at the wall if you ever need to remove the shaft or unblock the blades.

What to buy

▼ For hard/dry and soft foods

88% PHILIPS Hand Blender HR1363

PRICE $80

GOOD POINTS

- Best overall for hard and soft foods.
- Excellent result for performance tests.
- Not too heavy.
- Easy to clean.
- Very comfortable grip with non-slip area.
- Easy to attach and detach shaft.
- Controls are sealed, little pressure required, good colour contrast and labelling.
- Shaft and accessories are dishwasher safe.

BAD POINTS

- Plastic shaft can discolour.

82% SUNBEAM StickMaster Plus SM6400

PRICE $60

GOOD POINTS

- Excellent for blending soup, making mayonnaise, chopping carrots and making pesto sauce, and very good at processing curry pastes.
- Controls are easy to press.
- Fairly comfortable grip with non-slip area.
- Simple, easy-to-understand instructions, including recipes.
- Shaft and accessories are dishwasher safe.

BAD POINTS

- Plastic shaft and blade guard can discolour.

▼ For soft foods only

89% BAMIX Basic

PRICE $209

GOOD POINTS

- Excellent performance test result.
- Best for ease of use.
- Metal guard and blade can be removed for easier cleaning.
- Metal shaft and guard don't discolour.
- Instructions are simple to read.
- Five-year warranty.

BAD POINTS

- Cannot detach blade shaft.
- Most expensive blender tested.

87% BRAUN Multiquick MR 400 Plus

PRICE $60

GOOD POINTS

- Very good overall.
- Excellent result for performance tests.
- Lightest model tested.
- Slim design.
- Sealed rubber control, good contrast colour, requires little pressure.
- Easy to attach and detach shaft.
- Shaft and accessories are dishwasher safe.
- Easy to clean.

BAD POINTS

- Plastic shaft can discolour.
- No non-slip grip.
- Small indent around grip area gives slightly less wrist support.

87% CUISINART CSB-76A SmartStick

PRICE $70

GOOD POINTS

- Very good overall.
- Excellent result for performance tests.
- Not too heavy.
- Metal shaft and guard does not discolour.
- Large rectangular control easy to use, requires little pressure.
- Easy to clean.
- Easy to attach and detach shaft.
- Shaft and accessories are dishwasher safe.

BAD POINTS

- No non-slip grip.
- Food can become trapped in the connection part of the shaft.

87% TEFAL HB802 Click N Mix 600

PRICE $100

GOOD POINTS

- Very good overall.
- Excellent result for performance tests.
- Not too heavy.
- Metal shaft and guard does not discolour.
- Non-slip grip area.
- Easy to attach and detach shaft and blades.
- Sealed soft controls, requires little pressure.
- Controls have variable speeds with good colour contrast and labelling.
- Four interchangeable blades for whisking, mincing, blending and crushing ice.
- Shaft and accessories are dishwasher safe.

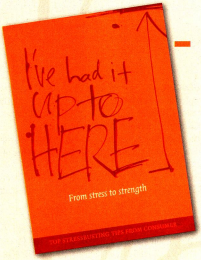
BAD POINTS

- Slightly hard edges around grip area.
- Some cracks can accumulate dirt.

About the rest

- For hard/dry foods as well as soft, the Sunbeam StickMaster Pro SM8650, Kenwood Wizzard Pro HB665 and Breville BSB500 all performed very well. The Kenwood Hand Blender HB520 and Sunbeam StickMaster Plus SM6400 were the least expensive of the hard/dry food models.
- Making both pesto (processing softer ingredients to a paste) and curry paste was a challenge for the Kenwood Hand Blender HB520 and the Kambrook, leaving them with a slightly lower performance score, but they coped well with chopping hard ingredients.
- For soft foods only, you may be happy with the performance of the rest of the models; however, we found it difficult to remove the shaft of the Sunbeam StickMaster SM6200.
- The Breville BSB300 Wizz Stick had an uncomfortable grip, while the Maxim and Solutions blenders both had generally low ease of use.

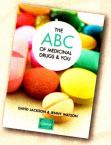
CHOICE Books



I've Had It Up to Here – From Stress to Strength $24.00

Move from stress to strength. Build your resilience so you can cope better and get more out of life.

The ABC of Medicinal Drugs And You



This helpful book details the important consumer issues of commonly prescribed and non-prescribed drugs.

$26.95

What to Do When Someone Dies

Step-by-step practical information to help cope with the death of a loved one.

$22.50

Changing Course

Learn some of the tools to enable you to embrace retirement with passion and live your post-employment life to the fullest.

$19.80

Easy Communication

An easy-to-read handbook designed to teach children how to become positive and confident communicators – an essential foundation for adulthood.

$22.45

The CHOICE Guide to Sydney for Kids

This updated fourth edition is packed with more than 400 destinations and activities for kids ranging from babies to 12 years, so you'll never be stuck for something to do in Sydney.

$22.50

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$6 for 1-2 books, free for 3 or more

Nowadays there are so many product recalls we may not be able to print all of them in CHOICE. For comprehensive recall information go to the Product Recalls Australia website: www.recalls.gov.au. If you don't have web access, call the Product Safety Policy section of the ACCC on 02 6243 1262.

Companies often rent 1800 numbers for a couple of months after a recall is announced. If the number given is no longer operating, phone the manufacturer or retailer direct.

PHARMACEUTICAL ■ Valeant Pharmaceuticals Australasia has recalled **Nyal Cold & Flu Fighter**, 24 tablets, and **Nyal Cold & Flu Fighter Day and Night**, 24 tablets, all batches and expiry dates. They were sold through Coles, Woolworths, Big W and Priceline stores.
The problem They have been associated with a small number of serious allergic reactions.
What to do Don't use them. Return them to the place of purchase for a refund, or call 1800 630 056.

TOY ■ Gepetto Toy Craft has recalled **Gepetto Bead Rattle 22** and **Bell Rattle 05**, sold in all states and territories except NT and Tasmania.
The problem They don't meet mandatory toy safety requirements.
What to do Remove them from the reach of children, and return them to the place of purchase for a refund.

TOY ■ McPherson's Consumer Products has recalled **Simply Kids 26 Magnetic Letters**, **Kids'r'Cool 26 Magnetic Letters** and **Kids'r'Cool Magnetic Numbers**. The Simply Kids Letters have a barcode of 9312601098982 and were sold in Woolworths between 19 April 2004 and 15 December 2008. The Kids'r'Cool Letters have a barcode of 9312601008509 and were sold in Coles, Big W, Kmart and independent grocery stores between 28 October 1998 and 15 December 2008. The Kids'r'Cool Numbers have a barcode of 9312601008516 and were sold in Coles, Big W, Kmart and independent grocery stores between 28 October 1998 and 15 December 2008.
The problem The magnets may come away from the letters and numbers and pose a choking hazard to young children.
What to do Remove them from the reach of children. Return them to the place of purchase for a refund.

TOY ■ McPherson's Consumer Products has recalled **Twinkle Tots Duck Family**, barcode number 9312601210551, sold in Coles, Big W, Kmart and independent grocery stores between 28 October 1998 and 15 December 2008.
The problem The head of the small duck may pose a choking/suffocation hazard to young children.
What to do Remove them from the reach of children, and return them to the place of purchase for a refund.

TOY ■ McPherson's Consumer Products has recalled **Twinkle Tots Soft Sports Ball**, barcode number 9312601306940, sold in Coles, Big W, Kmart and independent grocery stores between 15 December 2003 and 15 December 2008.
The problem The seams of the toy may not be secured, and the filling may become exposed, posing a choking hazard to young children.
What to do Remove it from the reach of children and return to the place of purchase for a refund.

STRETCH CORD ■ Jarvis Walker has recalled **Jarvis Marine Stretch Cord**, sold in a poly bag with a cardboard header card and available in three separate lengths: 45cm (code JM52272), 60cm (code JM52274) and 90cm (code JM52276). They were available at independent fishing tackle stores and Amart All Sports stores nationally between October 2005 and December 2008.
The problem They do not bear a mandatory safety warning label.
What to do Return them to the place of purchase for a refund, or call 03 8787 6900 or email info@jarviswalker.com.au

BICYCLES ■ Trek Bicycles Australia has recalled **Trek 2009 Mystic Girls** and **Trek 2009 Jet20 Boys bicycles**. The Mystic Girls bike was available in blue and pink, while the Jet20 Boys bike was available in black, white and blue.
The problem A number of bikes may not have a front brake set, and therefore don't comply with the Australian standard.
What to do Stop riding the bike. Purchasers will be contacted by dealers, or return it to the place of purchase for a front brake set to be fitted.

CHOICE Shopper
Find the best deal on laundry and kitchen appliances, home entertainment, cameras, printers, computers and cars. Call 1300 360 655 with the model name and number, the price you want to beat and your CHOICE personal subscriber number.

BICYCLE WHEEL ■ Salomen SAS has recalled **Mavic R-Sys Front Wheel**, an aluminium ribbed road riding wheel, with 5mm thick hollow black carbon fibre spokes. It has been sold since October 2007 as an aftermarket accessory, as well as being supplied on some new high-end bicycles.
The problem The carbon tubular spikes may break, causing the rider to lose control.
What to do Stop using it and return it to your nearest Mavic dealer to receive a replacement wheel. For more information call 03 8878 1000, 8:30am-5pm, Monday-Friday EST, or go to www.groupesportif.com/rsysrecall.

WATER FLOTATION DEVICE ■ Rip Curl has recalled **Rip Curl Stealth personal flotation device**, type 3 models. All batch numbers of styles 35332M, 36332M, W8332M, W9332M, W0332M, W9330M and W0330M are affected, while batch numbers 1166 and 1178 of style W1332M are affected.
The problem They fail mandatory performance tests of the Australian standard.
What to do Stop using them. Return them to Rip Curl Pty Ltd, 101 Surfcoast Highway, Torquay, 3228, to obtain a replacement product. For more information phone 03 5261 0022 or email servicecentre@ripcurl.com.au.

BUNK BED ■ Infinity Megastores has recalled **Single Bunk Bed** (model 276) and **Double Bunk Bed** (model 277), sold between April 2007 and October 2008 by Infinity Megastore and eBay.
The problem They don't comply with the design, safety, performance and marking requirements of the Australian standard.
What to do Stop using them. Contact Infinity on 03 9873 4442 to arrange for the bed to be collected, or for modifications to be made.

JET SKI ■ Kawasaki has recalled **Kawasaki Jet Ski**, model numbers JH1100-B2, JT1100-F1, JT1100-F2, JT1100-G1, JT1200-B1, JT1200-B2 and JT1500-A1. They were imported into Australia between January 2001 and December 2004.
The problem The fuel clamp and hose may be loose at the fitting due to an incorrect inner diameter on the fuel hose. This may allow the fuel to leak, creating the risk of a fire or explosion.
What to do Kawasaki will write to all affected owners.

STRETCH CORD ■ Fang Long Tang has recalled **Boboriyong Stretch Cords**, a two-piece elastic luggage strap set comprising a 90cm striped elastic cord with white plastic-coated hooks attached to each end, product number 6938383130349, and a single 1.5m-thick elastic cord with flat metal hooks attached at each end, product number 6938383830356. They are packaged in a poly bag with a white cardboard header card, and were sold at Direct Savings discount store in the Brisbane CBD and Stones Corner, and I-Life Factory store at Fortitude Valley, between October 2008 and December 2008.
The problem They do not bear a mandatory safety warning label.
What to do Return them to the place of purchase for a refund, or call 07 3012 8068 or email directsavings@gmail.com.

TOY ■ Universal Pictures has recalled **"Despereaux" stuffed toy**, a beige, green and brown colour with plastic whiskers and a thin rope belt. They were given away in Victoria at the Preston Library Fund day on 21 November 2008, and in WA as part of the Newspapers in Education Promotion with the *West Australian* newspaper on 21 November 2008, and at the Cinema Pioneers Christmas event on 27 November 2008. In SA they were given away at the Children's Christmas Party Event at Adelaide Zoo on 7 December 2008
The problem The whiskers may break off, posing a choking hazard to young children, and the thin rope belt may cause a tourniquet hazard.
What to do Remove it from the reach of children. Return it to Universal Pictures Publicity and Promotions Department, 3 Munn Reserve, Millers Point 2000. It will be replaced with a free family movie ticket.

MOBILE PREMIUM SERVICES

Premium rip-off

A proposed code to modify mobile premium services is a good start, but more needs to be done to protect consumers.

Rip-off mobile services, such as ringtones, horoscopes, music videos and wallpaper, continue to cause consumers considerable grief. These services, known as mobile premium services (MPS), have become such a significant and rapidly increasing area of consumer complaint that in the 12 months to June 2008, more than 2,000 consumers took their grievances all the way to the Telecommunications Industry Ombudsman. With complaints levels like these, it must surely be one of the most hated digital industries in the country.

CHOICE believes this level of complaint is unacceptable and confirms what we've suspected for some time – regulation of the telecommunications industry needs to be tougher.

Mobile premium services are available using phone numbers that commence with 19. They are charged at a much higher rate than ordinary mobile messages and are often a subscription service, in dollars, not cents. Younger people are particularly vulnerable and heavily targeted, as they may subscribe to a service without understanding the ongoing costs involved. Problems arise with services for various reasons, such as unclear pricing and because of difficulties in opting out.

CHOICE made a submission on the proposed Mobile Premium Services Code, developed by the industry body. We were happy to see the requirement for consumers to send two messages, known as "a double opt-in", before any subscription service begins. We also want to see:

- a monitoring mechanism to ensure that MPS providers comply with the new Code. For the new Code to have real effect, we need a watchdog in place with teeth
- no MPS ads to young people in peak TV viewing times
- no MPS access, unless requested
- no shonky use of "free" – free only means free!

We will keenly follow the development of the new code to ensure it provides adequate consumer protections – particularly for younger users. ■

CHOICE VIDEO

Watch "ScamTones", our parody of mobile premium services marketing, at www.choice.com.au/scamtones.

MEMBER SURVEY

CHOICE campaigns – we want to hear from you

You know what makes CHOICE different from other magazines: no advertising, just expert testing that delivers consumer, not profit-driven, information and advice.

But this is only half the story, and here's where we need your help. CHOICE is also a proud and influential advocate for consumers. We're not simply a green group, health group, financial advocate or food advisory body; rather we work across all these areas and more to advance consumers' rights, values and interests.

In short, *our* issues are *your* issues. And all our advocacy work is entirely funded by CHOICE members, ensuring our independence and objectivity. ■

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We'd like you to tell us which issues you'd like us to focus on, so we can carry your voices into parliamentary halls and boardrooms across the nation.

To make this easy, we've created an online survey for CHOICE members to have their say. Simply go to www.choice.com.au/membersurvey2009 to rate your priorities in a fun and thought-provoking quiz. It only takes a few minutes and your feedback will help determine CHOICE's campaigning agenda for the months ahead.

Alternatively, if you'd prefer to have a copy of our member survey sent to you, simply call us on 1800 069 552 during office hours.

Unjust bank penalty fees, big bank mergers, mobile premium service rip-offs aimed at kids, environmental greenwash and financial scams are just some of things that have recently kept the CHOICE campaigns team busy. And while we always keep a close eye on a wide range of matters affecting consumers, your feedback and suggestions ensure we stay focused on the issues that matter to you. We believe not only in helping our members choose the best of what's out there, but also in making what's out there even better.

You can also drop us a line anytime with your concerns or campaign ideas: email campaigns@choice.com.au, or visit www.choice.com.au and click on "Suggest-A-Campaign".

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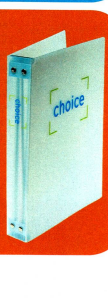

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old type indicates a test, survey or trial report, unbolded type indicates other articles. Indicates an update of a previous report, additions or corrections to reports, small ollow-up items, letters or recalls.

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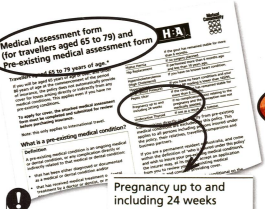
The month's best entry comes from Mr D. Reid, who's aged between 65 and 79 and definitely not pregnant. Thanks also to K. Henshall, S. Brown, G. Mitchell, P. Herbert, A. Thompson, W. Farnham and I. Perko for their contributions to this month's Hard Word.

If you have any examples you think deserve to be on this page, send them to Hard Word, *CHOICE*, 57 Carrington Road, Marrickville. Please don't email us your entries – we need the originals.

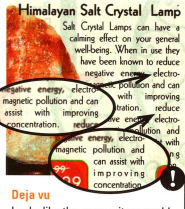
Sound advice

Always a good idea to see a health professional when you have persistent symptoms of pregnancy.


Medical Assessment form (for travellers aged 65 to 79) and Pre-existing medical assessment form
H:A
Pregnancy up to and including 24 weeks

These days anything's possible …

Probably an even better idea to see a health professional if you're aged between 65 and 79 – and pregnant.


Himalayan Salt Crystal Lamp
Salt Crystal Lamps can have a calming effect on your general well-being. When in use they have been known to reduce negative energy, electro-magnetic pollution and can assist with improving concentration. reduce negative energy, electro-magnetic pollution and can assist with improving concentration.

Deja vu

Looks like the copywriters could do with some help improving their concentration. Hey, like a Himalayan Salt Crystal Lamp like a Himalayan Salt Crystal Lamp?

Merry whatever

So nice to see the spirit of Christmas alive and well.

Finding stocking fillers.
Finding an extra $25 in your stocking.
Use your Diners Club Credit Line these holidays and get $25 cash back.
Simply spend $9,000 between 1 December '08 and 31 January '09. Then, we'll credit $25 to your account next February.
Madeleine O'Connor
Director
Consumer Lending
citibank

What's a few thousand bucks' debt between friends?

Citibank's Diners Club cardholders can not only help get the economy back on track, courtesy of a $9000+ spending spree, but receive a generous $25 cashback to help offset the debt. Everybody wins.

What a psylli instruction

How exactly does one get to eat these psyllium husks without opening the bag?

Pizza for a ravenous supermodel

We can't reproduce this ad "actual size", but trust us when we say the pizza's "actual size" on the ad is only 5cm across.

Easily 2 to 3 times the size of any other large pizza in town - fresh daily
ACTUAL SIZE
Full menu and the story so far at www.prestopizza.com.au
• Home delivery available
• Dine In and Take Away
• Fresh Desserts and Pure Gelato
Presto Pizza
Open from 5pm Tuesday to Sunday